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BLACK BUCKSKIN

OR, The Masked Men of Death Canyon.

BY COL. ARTHUR F. HOLT.

CHAPTER I.

LIGHTNING DICK'S WARNING.

It was not yet sunset, but in the gloomy depths of Death Canyon, where the rays of the sun never penetrated, weird, fantastic shadows had already begun to wrap things in their embrace.

A dismal place was Death Canyon, and no mistake, and the ominous name it bore was aptly applied.

On either hand a stupendous wall of rock reared itself on high, the precipitous sides bleak and barren, destitute of all verdure, save here and there a hardy little pine or a clinging vine or bunch of moss.

At the top—far, far up—a glimpse of blue sky was obtainable.

At one side of the canyon a mountain stream, small but turbulent, rushed leaping and swirling on its way.



"WHAT ON AIRTH AIR YE FELLERS SQUINTIN' AT?" HE INQUIRED. "ONE 'D THINK A CIRCUS HED CUM TER TOWN."

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On the other side, close to a precipitous bank overlooking the stream, was a rough, half-broken trail, so narrow at some points that it seemed impossible for a vehicle of ordinary size to pass in safety.

Over this trail one afternoon, just as the darkness was beginning to settle over the gulch, a clumsy-looking stage-coach rolled noisily on its way.

Drawn by four spirited horses, the huge vehicle lumbered over the rough trail, jouncing against boulders, rocking and swaying violently from side to side, until it seemed almost a miracle that the coach did not topple over the brink and crash down upon the jagged rocks below.

But an experienced driver held the reins—a stalwart six-footer known in that section as Four-in-hand Joe, whose skill and nerve were second to none, as was shown by the masterly manner in which he handled the ribbons.

Inside the vehicle were the passengers—six in number, four of whom were rough, bearded miners; the other couple, however, are deserving of more than passing notice.

One was a gentleman of fifty or thereabouts, dressed in the latest fashion, about whom was an air of polish and refinement. He sported valuable rings and diamond studs, while a massive gold chain dangled from his vest.

Beside him sat a young lady of eighteen summers, evidently his daughter, as pretty as a picture, and seeming as much out of place among her rude surroundings as a rose among thorns.

Her brown eyes sparkled brightly, and her rose-bud lips parting, revealed two rows of pearly teeth, as she chatted gayly with her companion.

On rolled the stage, bounding and jouncing over projecting rocks, to the great discomfiture of the passengers inside, while, perched on his elevated seat, Four-in-hand Joe cracked his whip and shouted to the leaders, as they tore along over the trail.

Down the gulch they dashed at a reckless speed, for they were behind time, and Joe was determined to make it up.

The coach swayed from side to side, and at times the wheels ran within three inches of the brink, while the passengers inside clung desperately to the seats, expecting every moment to be precipitated into the rushing torrent below.

But Four-in-hand Joe knew what he was about, and guided by his skillful hand, the horses kept safely on over the perilous course.

"Halt! Hands up!"

Sharp and stern these words suddenly rung out upon the air, coming from a point directly in front of the moving coach.

The driver heard but evinced no surprise.

"Hello!" he muttered. "Lightning Dick is out after toll."

And with the utmost coolness, he gave a long, steady pull that brought the horses to a halt immediately.

Then with his hands elevated above his head, he sat patiently awaiting further developments.

Four-in-hand Joe had learned from experience that it was not safe to resist under such circumstances.

As the stage halted, a band of men emerged from the dense shadows and surrounded it.

Several of them carried torches, and by the light of these it could be seen that they all wore slouch hats and masks, and were armed with revolvers.

Two of the road-agents held the horses, while the remainder drew up beside the stage, covering its occupants with their weapons.

Then a slender, athletic young fellow who seemed to be in command, advanced to the side of the vehicle and opened wide the door.

"Hands up, gentlemen!" he exclaimed, sternly, in a voice that was evidently disguised. "Sorry to trouble you, but if you wish to pass over this trail you must pay the toll. So step out, gents, an' shell out your valuables. Hurry, now, or I'll give you a taste of cold lead!"

And to emphasize his words, the road-agent thrust a cocked revolver in close proximity to the head of the nearest passenger.

The miners, perceiving the uselessness of resistance, reluctantly came out one by one, and were speedily relieved of what valuables they possessed.

The gentleman, too, had left the vehicle, and was about to assist his daughter to alight, when the road-agent turned to him.

"There is no necessity for the young lady to leave the coach," he said. "As for you, sir, I wish to speak a word with you in private. Step this way, please!"

The outlaw's speech was courteous enough now, and the passenger followed him without hesitation.

Indeed, he knew that it would be folly to refuse; besides, he felt a curiosity to know what the man in the mask had to say to him.

The road-agent strode away until they were out of ear-shot of the others.

Then he turned abruptly, and faced the man who had followed him.

"Well!" said the latter, testily. "What have you to say to me? You want my money and valuables, of course, but you could have taken them at the stage as well as here."

The road-agent laughed shortly.

"You are mistaken, sir!" he exclaimed. "I do not intend to take a cent of yours, Charles Castleton."

The man addressed started violently, and stared at the bandit in amazement.

"You called me Charles Castleton," he exclaimed in surprise. "Who in the fiend's name are you, that you should know my name?"

The outlaw chuckled grimly.

"Who am I?" he reiterated. "Well, I'm known in these regions as Lightning Dick, road-agent, boss of Death Canyon, as any one who knows can tell you. But you admit, then, that I struck your handle correctly?"

"You gave my name all right, sir, if that is what you mean," answered Castleton, a little stiffly.

"Exactly. You are Castleton, late of St. Louis. You're a banker; the girl in the coach is your daughter Cora; you are on your way to the town of Bullion City, where you intend to engage in business. Am I right?"

Charles Castleton glared at the masked outlaw as if he saw a ghost.

"Where in the name of Heaven did you gain your information?" he demanded. "You seem to know my business better than I do myself. Are you man or devil?"

Again did Lightning Dick laugh as if highly amused.

"I'm a man, I hope," he said in answer to the banker's puzzled inquiry, "though most of the inhabitants believe that I'm in some way related to his Satanic Majesty. As to how I obtained my information, that must remain a secret. Suffice it to say that I know it."

"Well, Sir Road-Agent," said Castleton, nettled by the cool demeanor of the man who confronted him, "this is wasting time. I don't know you from Adam, and it puzzles me to comprehend how you learned so much about my private affairs; but I don't see how it concerns you in any way, so with your kind permission I will now return to the coach."

He turned to go, but the hand of the bandit fell upon his arm and detained him.

"Easy, my friend!" exclaimed Lightning Dick, coolly. "I have something more to say."

"Well."

"I wish to inform you, to begin with, that what I have to say is for your good. You've often heard, no doubt, the old saying to the effect that the devil is not so black as he is painted. Neither is Lightning Dick such a fiend as he is said to be. I wish to convince you of my good intentions, and give you a little advice which I trust you will heed, for your daughter's sake if not for your own."

"I am listening, so proceed with your good advice," said the banker, sarcastically.

"Well, to commence with, you are not aware of the true nature of the camp which is your destination. You imagine that Bullion City is in some degree civilized, but you will be greatly disappointed when you arrive there. It is a mere mining-camp, just started, with more saloons than dwellings, and the inhabitants make up the toughest crowd to be found this side of Leadville. Gamblers, blacklegs, ruffians and bummers are there in all their glory, and there are not a dozen decent men in the whole camp. You can see, yourself, that it would be a bad place to take your daughter, to say nothing of yourself."

"I'll admit that, sir, providing what you say is true," said the banker, somewhat impressed by the words of the road-agent. "But what would you have me do—turn back?"

"That would be by far the safest course, I'll allow," said Lightning Dick, "and I should follow it if I were you."

Charles Castleton hesitated a moment ere he spoke.

"Pon my word, Lightning Dick, as you call yourself, I don't know what to make of you," he then said, candidly. "You seem to be a friend to me, yet you are a bandit. If I could only see your face—"

Lightning Dick shook his head negatively.

"That is impossible," he said decidedly. "I never unmask."

"Well," said the banker, after a moment's silence. "Here is my decision. I started for Bullion City and to Bullion City I shall go. I thank you for your warning, and shall keep a sharp lookout, trusting in my own ability to protect myself and daughter from all harm."

The road-agent chief bowed coldly.

"Very well," he said. "Act your own pleasure. You'll soon see the time, mark my words, when you'll wish you had taken my advice and fled from that accursed town. However, should evil befall you, remember that you have a true friend and benefactor in Lightning Dick."

And as the road-agent ceased speaking, he turned on his heel and disappeared in the darkness, leaving the banker to retrace his steps to the coach.

Then a shrill whistle rung out, and the outlaws surrounding the vehicle vanished in the shadows as if by magic.

Four-in-hand Joe whipped up his animals, and once more the stage rattled down the gulch.

Leaning back in his seat, Charles Castleton pondered upon the events that had just transpired.

"Pon my word," he soliloquized, "things are beginning to grow interesting already. I'd give a cool thousand to see the face of that chap who styles himself Lightning Dick. How he obtained a knowledge of my affairs is a problem that bothers me. He seemed friendly enough, but he may be playing some deep game. However, time will tell!"

And the stage rolled on toward Bullion City.

CHAPTER II.

ENTER HURRICANE KIT.

NESTLED among the mountains, a few miles beyond Death Canyon, was the place which bore the euphonious name of Bullion City.

It was a mere mining-camp, that had sprung up less than six months before, and consisted of rude miners' shanties, several saloons and gambling-dens, a "hotel" and a building which answered the double purpose of store and post-office.

The inhabitants were about two hundred in number, and comprised miners, gamblers, adventurers, thieves and bummers, the former being considerably in the minority.

Bullion City was scarcely the place for a respectable man, it must be confessed.

In the saloons, oily-tongued sharpers fleeced unwary "pilgrims" to their hearts' content, while the reckless men who prowled about the town seeking for plunder rendered it unsafe to be out at night unless well-armed.

In addition to this, a daring band of road-agents under Lightning Dick kept the town in a continual state of excitement by their audacious raids and robberies.

Taking it all in all, Bullion City had won an unenviable reputation for being the worst place of its size in that region.

As before stated, saloons were numerous, they being rough board structures, with a single exception.

This one was the popular resort rejoicing in the appellation of "The Gambler's Paradise," owned by the leading man in the place.

It was a large, well-built structure, contrasting most favorably with the others; and into it we would have the reader accompany us on the night following the scenes depicted in our first chapter.

Upon passing through the door we find ourselves in a large apartment; a bar runs along one side of it, behind which a hard-looking character handed out the vile mixture called for by the row of thirsty mortals who ranged on the other side.

The room was filled with loungers, who in turn filled the air with tobacco smoke and fumes of whisky, while songs, oaths and ribald jests were continually heard.

It was a hard crowd that nightly assembled in the bar-room of the Gambler's Paradise, and no mistake, as could be readily seen by glancing over their crime-stained features.

In the rear of the bar-room, and separated from it by a stout partition through which a door was cut, was another apartment, well-furnished with all the appliances for gambling.

A faro-bank was in full blast at one end of the room, a three-card monte man held sway at the other, while various other games were in progress at the tables.

Here were to be met men of different types—gamblers and sports in their inevitable suit of broadcloth, spotless shirt-front and sparkling diamond pin; miners who, after toiling through

the day, had come to tempt the fickle goddess Fortune and try to increase their pile; idlers who, in the vernacular of the mines, were "clean busted," but who lounged about, watching the different games in progress and patiently waiting for something to turn up.

On this particular evening, the Gambler's Paradise was, as usual, well patronized, nearly all the tables being occupied.

A crowd was congregated around the monte-dealer, who was using both tongue and fingers with astonishing rapidity.

"Walk up hyar, gents!" he was shouting. "Cum up an' make yer fortune. Hyar it is, jest as simple as breathin'. I jest take ther keards—ye see 'em hyar, ther queen o' diamonds, king o' hearts an' ace o' spades—an' shuffle 'em, so," executing the movement with lightning-like swiftness. "Then I sling 'em down, back up, an' pick out ther ace, so! It's easy enuff. All done by a simple twist o' the wrist, an' hyar's ten dollars a-waitin' for ther galoot who kin do it. Come, now, pilgrims, hyar's a chance to make a stake. Step up an' set ther ball a-rollin'."

"Hey, squire, d'ye mean ter say thet ye'll gi' me a ten if I'll pick out ther ace o' spades?" demanded a voice in the rear.

All turned and beheld a most curious specimen of humanity standing just within the door.

He was six feet in height, straight as an arrow, with broad, powerful chest and long arms, while his face was covered with a short, stubbly beard.

His garments consisted of a black, swallow-tail coat, yellow vest from which hung a large brass chain, and striped, tight-fitting pantaloons tucked into heavy cowhide boots, while upon his head a battered stove-pipe hat was rakishly placed.

It was evident that there was hayseed in his hair, and how he came to be in Bullion City was a mystery to the occupants of the room, who, upon sight of the strange apparition in the doorway, burst into loud peals of laughter.

There was a shrewd twinkle in the sharp, blue eyes of the countryman, as he peered at the motley congregation from under his shaggy brows.

Unabashed by the battery of curious eyes, he advanced boldly into the room.

"What on airth air ye fellers squintin' at?" he inquired. "One'd think a circus hed cum ter town. Bless yer, gentlemen, I'm only Jonathan Jinks, late of Cornville, down in Maine, an' I've cum ter this kentry ter seek my fortune, same as you-uns. Didn't yer ever see a gentleman afore?"

The crowd greeted this blunt speech with shouts of laughter and jeering remarks, but to this the man from Maine paid no further heed.

Ignoring the shouts and questions that assailed him, he pushed his way up to the monte dealer, repeating the inquiry which he had made upon entering the room.

The sharper grinned broadly, as with a rapid glance he noted the green and innocent appearance of the countryman.

Here was an excellent opportunity to rope in a greenhorn, and the gambler was determined to play him for all he was worth.

"Yas, pilgrim," he promptly responded, in reply to Jonathan's inquiry. "Ye struck ther nail on the head thet time. 'Thar's a tenner in my pocket thet's waitin' for ther galoot who picks out ther ace. Put up yer money an' try yer luck."

"You kin bet yer boots, sonny," cried Jonathan Jinks, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "Yer uncle is on ter thet ev'ry time."

Out came a plethoric pocketbook, from which the man from Maine extracted a ten, which he flourished before the nose of the monte dealer.

"Proceed, ole hoss!" he cried. "Start up ther circus."

The gambler carelessly picked up the cards and commenced to shuffle them.

He was an adept at his profession, as was shown by the way he manipulated the pasteboards.

His fingers moved like lightning, while the keen eyes of the countryman followed every motion.

Finally the dealer spread the cards, face down, upon the table.

"There ye are!" he remarked, laconically. "Pick out ther ace, pilgrim."

Jonathan scratched his head, looked sharply at the cards, then scratched his head again, gave his trowsers a hitch, squirted something less than a pint of tobacco-juice upon the floor, and laid his brawny hand upon a card.

He held it up to view, a grin of satisfaction

overspreading his features, and all saw that it was the ace of spades.

"You've won," said the dealer, coolly, as he handed over the stake. "Shall we try again?"

"Wal, I reckon so," responded Jonathan, promptly. "Ye kin count me in fer another. Make it a twenty, hey?"

"Done!" said the monte sharp, coolly.

The money was put up and covered, the cards were again shuffled, and again did the man from Maine turn up the winning ace.

Jinks threw up his hat and shouted in his enthusiasm.

"Hooray!" he yelled. "Ther twenty is mine. Shuffle 'em up ag'in, ole hoss!"

This the gambler did, though with a show of reluctance, and the result was the same as before.

There was a broad grin upon the face of the elated countryman, as he pocketed his winnings, while the dealer appeared somewhat nettled and excited.

"See hyar!" he exclaimed. "Them small bets are bringin' yer luck. Make it bigger, an' I'll bet ye'll lose."

"Sartain, ole hoss!" promptly replied Jonathan, catching at the bait. "Name yer pile."

"Call it a cool thousand," said the sharper, producing the money.

Jonathan uttered a low whistle, but without hesitation he covered the deposit with an equal amount in crisp, new bills.

There was a peculiar smile on the sharp countenance of the gambler, as he rapidly manipulated the cards, while those in the room who knew the tricks of the monte-man exchanged expressive winks and grins.

"Here ye hev 'em!" cried the dealer, as he threw down the cards. "Pick ther ace an' take ther thousand."

Jinks had sharply watched the movements of the gambler, and now with the utmost confidence he placed his hand upon a card.

But it was not the ace!

The sharper chuckled, the lookers-on grinned broadly, while Jonathan glared at the cards with a ludicrous look of astonishment and disgust upon his face.

He had been taken in and done for, and no mistake.

There was a moment's silence, which was broken by the dealer.

"You've lost, old man, an' I opine I'll take thet stake," he remarked coolly, as he reached out for the pile of greenbacks, a grin of triumph upon his ugly countenance.

"Hold on, there! Touch that money, and off goes your head!"

Every man in the room started violently as these words, sharp and stern, rung out upon the air with startling distinctness.

They came from a person who had entered the room unperceived, and who now stood just behind the countryman.

He was a youth of twenty or thereabouts, tall and shapely as Apollo, with the physique of a Hercules and the face of an Adonis—the very perfection of grace and strength.

His eyes were sharp and piercing, and a handsome mustache adorned his lip.

He was appareled in a neat, close-fitting suit of a dark material, which set off his graceful form to splendid advantage.

Firm and cool he stood there, one hand resting carelessly upon his hip, the other holding a polished revolver, the muzzle of which frowned threateningly upon the monte dealer.

"Throw up your hands, you infernal cheat!" he continued in the same stern accents, "or I'll fill your miserable carcass full of lead."

The crowd fell back precipitately, while the gambler glared fiercely at the intruder.

However, it was evident that the young stranger was in deadly earnest, and, under the persuasive influence of the weapon staring him in the face, the card-sharp quailed.

"Who'n blazes are you?" he snarled, savagely, as with extreme reluctance he elevated his hands above his head.

The new-comer laughed coolly.

"It's none of your business who I am," he retorted. "However, I don't mind telling you that I sometimes am called Hurricane Kit. You may have heard of me."

The gambler started, as did many others, for they had most of them heard of Hurricane Kit, who had the reputation of being a model of strength and bravery, and a terror to evil-doers.

The monte dealer cast a furtive glance about the apartment, and saw that many of his friends were near by; this seemed to inspire him with confidence.

"Ye kin be Hurricane Kit er ther devil—I

don't keer which," he exclaimed, with an air of bravado. "What d'yer mean by stickin' yer nose around whar ye ain't wanted, an' bu'stin' up a fair an' squar' game in this way?"

The youth who had called himself Hurricane Kit laughed amusedly.

"Fair and square!" he reiterated. "Ha, ha! That's good. Why, Mister Man, you're the most infernal liar in existence! The game you are playing, far from being square, is a decided skin."

The face of the gambler fairly blazed with wrath.

"It's a lie!" he yelled. "I defy you to prove it."

"I will at once proceed to do so," answered the young adventurer, promptly, "and I call upon you, gentlemen, to see that I am correct."

"Go ahead, ole hoss!" exclaimed Jonathan Jinks, excitedly. "If ther durn galoot has cheated, I'll wring his blasted neck, so now!"

"Ay, let us hev fair play an' no trickery," assented several of the miners, while the numerous friends of the sharper said nothing, but hovered near, glowering upon the bold young intruder and his friends.

Well, to begin with," said Hurricane Kit, addressing the gambler, "we have here three cards, one of which is the ace of spades. Now, as our friend, here, failed to pick out the winning card, it must be one of the remaining two. Am I right in my supposition?"

The dealer nodded assent.

"We will see if it is so," continued Kit, coolly. "Gentlemen, one of you turn up the cards on the table. If the game is on the square, one of them must be the ace of spades."

A miner advanced and picked up the cards. Neither was the ace.

Hurricane Kit turned triumphantly upon the crowd.

"You see that I am right," he exclaimed.

"The scoundrel played this man for a sucker, allowing him to win small sums at first to make him confident. Then as soon as a large amount was wagered, he juggled the ace and put another card in its place. Of course it was impossible to pick out the ace when there was no such card there."

Jonathan Jinks listened to the explanation in open-mouthed amazement.

"Je-rusalem!" he cried. "What a gold-darn fool I was tew git sucked in that way. But where in Jericho did ther ace go tew?"

"I'll show you," said the youth, and seizing the gambler's arm he gave it a hearty shake.

Several cards dropped to the floor, among them being the missing ace of spades.

"That settles it," cried the countryman, looking daggers and pitchforks at the discomfited gambler. "Let me get holt on ye, ye miserable snipe, an' I'll chaw ye inter mince-meat!"

Jonathan started forward, vengeance gleaming in his eye, but Hurricane Kit stretched out his powerful arm and restrained him.

"Easy, pard!" he exclaimed. "We want no trouble. I've exposed his little game, and that's enough. Scoop in the stakes—they belong to you."

Thus directed, the man from Maine pocketed the money, much to the chagrin of the card-sharp, who dared not try to prevent him with the muzzle of Hurricane Kit's revolver staring him in the face.

The latter nodded approvingly, and was about to withdraw the siege of his weapon, when the sudden tramp of feet was heard in the next room.

The next instant the door flew violently open, and a man rushed into the apartment as if on business bent.

CHAPTER III.

WHO FIRED THE SHOT?

THE individual who so hastily entered the gaming-room of the "Gambler's Paradise" was a man of striking appearance.

He was of middle age, tall and straight, with broad chest and shoulders and muscular arms. His hair was jetty black, and a pair of piercing eyes glittered from beneath their shaggy brows; a fierce, brigandish-looking mustache adorned his lip.

He was dressed in the finest broadcloth and linen; patent-leather shoes incased his feet, while a stylish silk hat was placed rakishly upon his head.

A massive gold chain dangled from his vest, numerous rings glittered upon his fingers, while a big solitaire flashed from his spotless bosom.

It would require but a single glance for one acquainted with Western ways to determine the character of this individual.

Gambler and sport he was without a doubt, and his muscular frame and stern, harsh features gave evidence that he was a tough customer to handle.

He was evidently well known to the assemblage, for more than one brawny man shrunk back as he entered the room, while from lip to lip passed the name:

"Black Gaspard!"

No wonder the miners started and greeted his entrance with looks of awe, for Black Gaspard, as he was called, was known in the camp as the King of Gamblers and the recognized "boss" of Bullion City.

He it was, so 'twas said, who had discovered the rich ore-beds in the gulch, something less than a year before.

At first he, with a few companions, kept the discovery to themselves, but when others came flocking to the spot, he wisely staked out claims and sold them at round prices to the newcomers.

In this manner he made fully as much money as by working the mines himself, and as the new camp increased in population, so did the wealth and popularity of Black Gaspard.

He was owner and proprietor of "The Gambler's Paradise," and his skill with the pasteboards had won for him the title of "Gambler King."

Black Gaspard possessed great influence among the rough and ready denizens of Bullion City, among whom his word was law.

Such was the man who strode into the gaming-room, and those who knew him scented trouble ahead.

Black Gaspard took in the situation at a single glance, and his eyes snapped venomously as he advanced toward the spot where Hurricane Kit was standing.

"What's the trouble hyar?" he demanded, as he confronted the youth. "Who 'n blazes are you, young feller, sailin' round hyar with your barkers, turnin' my place into a shootin'-gallery? What's the rumpus, eh?"

Hurricane Kit lowered his pistol, and turning carelessly around, faced the Gambler King.

"Allow me to answer your question, Yankee fashion, by asking another," he said, pleasantly. "Who in Old Harry are you?"

"I'll let you know who I am in short order," snarled Black Gaspard, nettled by the nonchalance of the youth whom he sought to intimidate. "I'm boss hyar, an' I don't propose to have my establishment turned into a shootin'-gallery by any young vagabond who may chance to come along. D'ye understand that?"

Hurricane Kit's lips compressed, and his eyes flashed angrily.

"Now look here, Mister Man," he exclaimed, in tones which showed that he meant business, "I don't want to have any trouble with you or any one else, but it seems to me some one is getting a little too personal. I think you said something about vagabonds. Will you please repeat your remark, and say it slow?"

There was a murmur of mingled surprise and admiration, as these bold words fell from the lips of the young stranger.

It was something new to have a man face Black Gaspard in such a manner, and those in the immediate vicinity discreetly fell back a pace, having visions of flying bullets and a hot time generally.

As for the Gambler King himself, he was for a moment utterly amazed, and he glared at the young man before him in speechless astonishment.

"You young galoot!" he yelled, as soon as he found his tongue. "Dare you talk to Black Gaspard that way? Why, you young whelp, I'll fire you out into the streets in two seconds!"

And the gambler advanced a step, as though about to execute his threat.

He seemed to have forgotten that the youth still held his revolver in his hand, but this fact was speedily recalled to his mind when the cold barrel of the weapon was suddenly placed against his temple.

"I wouldn't advise you to try it on," warned Hurricane Kit, in cool, provoking tones. "One step further an' you take the contents of this pill-box. I don't want to quarrel, but whoever crowds on me, be he man or devil, will get as udd as he sends!"

"Yas, 'squire, sorter rein in yer hosses, an' tell them darn rascals back yender tew take their paws off their shootin'-irons," supplemented Jonathan Jinks, whose sharp eyes had detected a suspicious movement on the part of several of the gambler's satellites.

Black Gaspard saw that he was covered, and that further movement would result in instant death, for he read a grim determination on the

face of the youth who confronted him, and knew that the latter would not hesitate an instant in pulling trigger.

Besides, he could see that several in the room, rough but honest miners, were inclined to side with Hurricane Kit, and the Gambler King was sensible enough not to risk a general row, though he was greatly discomfited at being thus bearded in his own establishment by a mere youth.

On this occasion he saw the policy of temporary peace, though he was far from being through with Hurricane Kit. The youth had incurred his lasting enmity, and he would seize the first opportunity to get even.

"I don't want to quarrel with you," he said, with a smile that only half-concealed the fiendish look upon his dark face. "But I tolerate no disturbance here. If you wish to remain and behave yourself, you can do so; otherwise, your room is better than your company."

A peculiar smile swept over Kit's face as he noted the sudden change in the speech of the gambler. He comprehended the designs of the latter, and was not to be caught napping.

"Thanks for your kind permission," he said, with biting sarcasm, "but I generally pick my own company. I've seen enough of this place to convince me that honesty here is the exception and not the rule, and I think I'll seek a more congenial place of amusement."

"If your pride is wounded, Sir Gambler, and you hanker after satisfaction, I dare say you can find me somewhere about the camp, and I shall be most happy to oblige you or any of your friends. Until then, *adios!*"

And lifting his hat in mock courtesy, Hurricane Kit backed through the open door, and vanished from the view of the discomfited gambler and his friends.

The countryman had followed close at his heels and when once outside of the saloon, he grasped the hand of the youth and shook it heartily.

"You've got a powerful lot o' sand, stranger," he exclaimed, admiringly. "Allow me tew thank ye for your interference in my behalf, though I'm afeerd you've got yerself intew a muss, all on my account. Yeou've got that black chap in yender set dead ag'in' ye, an' yeou'll get bit by him if yeou don't look sharp. They say he's chain-lightnin' let loose, an' he's got about ev'ry man in ther camp at his back. A tough crowd they are I reckon."

Hurricane Kit laughed lightly.

"Thanks, my friend, for your warning," he said. "This Black Gaspard may be a rough customer, but he'll find he has no mere boy to deal with. There'll be a surprise-party somewhere in this vicinity, if he offers to molest me in the future."

"You've got the grit tew dew it, yes, sir-ee!" asserted the man from Maine, as he turned away. "I've got tew go, neow, but if ever yeou're in a scrape an' want any help, jest call on Jonathan Jinks, an' I reckon he'll be on hand. Good-night, 'squire!"

And the queer-looking countryman, striding away, vanished in the darkness.

Hurricane Kit looked earnestly after his receding figure.

"I wonder who the dickens that fellow is!" he soliloquized. "It's my opinion that he's no more of a countryman than I am, but is playing a part for some purpose. This is a strange land, surely, chuck-full of rogues and double-dealing. However, Jonathan seems to be an honest fellow, and it's well to have a few such friends in a place like this."

The young man sauntered leisurely along the only street of the town, ruminating upon the events of the evening.

"Well," he soliloquized, "I could not rest in a civilized place, but came back here in quest of further adventure, and the prospects are that I shall have my fill of it. I've made a good beginning—made one friend and Heaven knows how many enemies. The chances are that there'll be some lively work soon, for they say that Black Gaspard is the boss of the camp, and that the majority of the citizens are his hirelings. However, come what may, I shall not back out."

As he finished speaking there came a bright flash, followed by the sharp report of a revolver, and a bullet whistled viciously by Kit's head, grazing his temple.

It was a narrow escape, and even as it was the young man reeled and dropped to the earth, momentarily stunned by the shock.

However, he was quickly on his feet again, and with a revolver drawn and ready for use, he dashed resolutely toward the spot from whence the cowardly shot had been fired.

He soon reached a large boulder, from behind which the would-be assassin had undoubtedly

sent his deadly missile, but no signs of a human being were to be seen.

Kit realized the uselessness as well as danger of searching for him in the darkness, for at that moment the assassin might be lurking near, waiting for an opportunity to complete his work, therefore, he cautiously retraced his steps.

"The plot thickens!" he soliloquized. "It's plain to me that I've got a few foes in this camp, and they're determined to wipe me out without delay. I'll have to play sharp to get ahead of 'em; soon as morning comes, I'll get on the track of the rascal who fired that shot if possible. Until then, I think I'll seek a safer place than this."

He walked on without further interruption; if any of the citizens had heard the pistol-shot, they paid no attention to it, such things being by no means uncommon in Bullion City.

Reaching the "hotel," a rude, unfinished structure, he engaged a room, and immediately retired, first taking care to secure the door.

He was exceedingly weary, and quickly dropped into a sound slumber, remaining unconscious of what was transpiring about him.

Kit was awakened in the morning by the sunbeams, which straggled in through the numerous cracks and crevices, and played upon his face; and when he opened his eyes, they fell upon an object at sight of which the youth gave a violent start of surprise.

Upon the opposite wall a sheet of paper was fluttering, held there by the keen point of a Bowie.

Hurricane Kit was on his feet at a single bound, and he curiously examined the paper, which had been placed there while he slept.

Written in a neat but hurried hand were these warning words:

"HURRICANE KIT:—Danger of which you little dream lies in your path. Enemies are on every hand, and unless you fly at once, you will never leave Bullion City alive. If you are wise, you'll take the advice of a friend and skip ere it is too late."

There was no signature to this terse warning, and Hurricane Kit scrutinized it in bewilderment.

Who had placed it there? and how had the person, whoever he was, gained admittance to the room, when the door was securely fastened from the inside?

These were the questions the young man asked himself, and the last was speedily answered, as his gaze fell on the roof of the building.

Over one corner of the apartment was a crevice of considerable dimensions, and a person could, after reaching the roof, put in his arm and throw the knife and paper against the wall.

This explained that problem, but Kit was still puzzled to think who his unknown friend could be, unless it was Jonathan Jinks, the countryman.

Hurricane Kit stood for a moment deeply wrapped in thought.

Suddenly he started up, tearing the missive into fragments.

"By Heaven!" he exclaimed. "The one who wrote that warning may mean well, but I'm inclined to believe that it's all a trick, got up by Black Gaspard for the purpose of scaring me out of town. If that's the case, he'll find that I don't scare worth a cent. Come what may, I'm ready for it. There'll be no backing out on my part."

And there was a resolute look on the face of the youth, that told her he meant every word that he said.

CHAPTER IV.

BLACK GASPARD'S VISIT.

BACK to the Gambler's Paradise we would have the reader accompany us, a short time after the departure of Hurricane Kit and Jonathan Jinks, the countryman.

The excitement caused by the advent of the young adventurer had soon ceased, and now the usual routine of the place was going on, all forgetful of the events that had just transpired.

A large crowd filled the room, and the various games were in full blast.

The three card monte man had recovered from his excitement, and was working his game as coolly as ever.

In a distant corner of the apartment, seemingly unheeded of what was taking place around him, Black Gaspard, the Gambler King sat with his chair tipped back and his feet resting on a table, indolently puffing at a cigar.

Yet, in spite of his apparent listlessness, the brain of the gambler was actively at work. He was thinking of Hurricane Kit, and de-

vising some way to dispose of the youth, whom he cordially hated.

It was the first time in the history of Bullion City that he had been opposed by any man, so it was natural that the proud and arrogant gambler should thirst for satisfaction.

He was thinking of some way in which to get rid of Hurricane Kit without exposing himself to danger, for Black Gaspard was not fool enough to risk his own life against one who had the reputation of being a crack-shot and dare-devil fighter, when he could as well accomplish his purpose in a safer manner.

Suddenly he thought of a plan which promised to be successful, and he slapped his thigh enthusiastically.

"I have it!" he muttered. "A beautiful plan, which can't help working like a charm. Ha, ha! my bold young fellow, I'll soon have you in a fix of which you little think," and a smile, fiendish and cruel in the extreme, swept over his swarthy face, as he settled back in his chair.

Just then the shuffling of feet was heard, and the next moment a stranger dashed in through the door.

He was a man of ordinary size, dressed in the rude garments characteristic of the miner, with a heavy beard of fiery red that concealed most of his face from view.

He was a stranger to all present, but he strode into the gaming-room with as much independence as if he were the proprietor thereof.

"Whoop!" he shouted, as he suddenly came to a halt in the middle of the room. "Feller-galoots, let me interjuce myself! I'm Bill Blower, from Gunnison, an' down thar I'm reckoned the boss at keards. I heard ye had a feller hyar called Gas Black-pard, er somethin', who calls hisself ther Gambler King, an' I've cum all ther way ter show thet he's a liar. I kin beat him playin', an' hyar's what sez so!"

And as he finished speaking, the new-comer drew from his pocket a huge roll of greenbacks, which he flourished above his head.

It was evident from his unsteady gait and reekless words that the fellow was half-drunk, and he was immediately surrounded by a crowd of idlers and sharpers, whose eyes were fixed longingly upon the displayed wealth.

Several eagerly offered to play with him, but he waived them haughtily aside.

"Clear out!" he cried. "I've got no time ter spend on small fry; I'm lookin' fer big game. Cum, trot out yer boss card-juggler, an' see me do him up. Whoop!"

At this moment Black Gaspard, whose attention had been attracted by the words of the miner, pushed his way through the crowd.

"Hello! What's the rumpus here?" he demanded. "I'm Black Gaspard, fellow. What do you want?"

"Are you the feller who calls hisself the Gambler King?" inquired Bill Blower, eagerly.

"Yes, that's what men call me," assented the sharper.

"Then you're my huckleberry. Ye claim ter be ther boss at keards; so do I. I dare ye to play a game to decide ther question."

Black Gaspard smiled, for he saw a splendid chance to increase his pile.

"You're drunk, my friend, and you're sure to lose," he said, "but if you wish to play, I can accommodate you."

"Hooray! That's ther way ter talk!" yelled Bill Blower, enthusiastically. "Lead on, Mac-duff!"

Black Gaspard led the way to a vacant table, while the crowd followed, to see the delegate from Gunnison plucked by their favorite.

"I say," exclaimed Bill Blower, glancing about him uneasily, "I can't play with all these galoots a-gapin' at me. It makes my nerves unsteady. Ha'n't ye got a place whar we kin be by ourselves?"

"Step right this way," said Black Gaspard, promptly, and he led the way to a small apartment at one end of the building and ushered the miner in.

"This is my private room," he remarked, as he closed the door. "Here we will be free from interruption. Name your game."

"Poker's my best holt, I opine."

"Good enough! Shall we play for a small stake to begin with?"

"Small stakes be durned!" snorted the man from Gunnison. "Thar's no half-way biz about me. I'll play one game, an' put up my hull pile ag'in' an equal amount. How does that suit yer?"

"What's your pile?"

"A cool five thousan', I reckon."

"Very well. That suits me perfectly," said the gambler, with a chuckle, as he reached for his pocket-book.

The money was put up and the game commenced.

Black Gaspard was confident of victory, yet, with such a large amount at stake, he played very carefully, and the game resulted in his favor.

"I told you that you'd lose," remarked the Gambler King, complacently, as he reached out his hand to sweep the board. "Hello! What the—"

Bill Blower had suddenly produced a revolver, and the dark barrel was now leveled straight at the head of Black Gaspard.

"Hold on a bit, mister!" said the miner, coolly. "I can't afford to let you take that stake, ye know."

"Curse you!" gasped the gambler. "What do you mean?"

"I mean to get away with you, Black Gaspard," chuckled the other. "Hold up your hands, now, and don't utter a sound, or I'll bore your head full of holes. Understand?"

The Gambler King saw that he was fairly caught, and with a muttered oath he obeyed, knowing full well the danger of refusing.

Bill Blower smiled approvingly.

"Now fer biz," he said, after pocketing the stakes. "That's a nice watch you have got there. Permit me to borrow it," and he deftly transferred it from the gambler's pocket to his own.

Black Gaspard ground his teeth in his rage, but he valued his life too highly to resist, with a pistol staring him in the face.

With the utmost deliberation, the dare-devil stranger went through his pockets, taking everything of value—rings, pin, and other articles all found their way into the pocket of the miner, who kept Gaspard covered, while he worked dextrously with his other hand.

"There!" remarked the robber, coolly. "I think I've done a good night's work, Black Gaspard."

"You have, curse you!" growled the gambler. "But I'll be even with you yet, you infernal thief!"

The stranger chuckled.

"Make no idle threats," he said. "Well, I must leave you now, my friend. If any one asks where your toggery has gone to, refer him to Lightning Dick, the road-agent."

"The deuce you say!" gasped Black Gaspard, starting back in astonishment, as the man, with a mocking laugh, threw open the door and darted outside.

As soon as he recovered from his surprise, the gambler rushed in pursuit.

"Stop that man!" he yelled. "He's Lightning Dick, the road-agent. Stop him, I say!"

Things looked rather blue for the outlaw chief, for a dozen men were between him and the door; but he proved equal to the emergency.

Swiftly raising his revolver, he fired at the single hanging-lamp that lighted the room.

The bullet shattered the lamp, which was upset, and the next moment the place was wrapped in darkness.

Then came a rush, followed by pistol-shots, and for the next five minutes the Gambler's Paradise was the scene of intense excitement.

The tramping of feet, excited cries of the men and groans of the wounded, coupled with the crack of revolvers and the whizzing of bullets, made such a din that a passer-by might have been led to believe that Pandemonium had suddenly broken loose within the saloon.

Finally, a light was procured, and the firing ceased.

Then it was that the occupants of the saloon saw that they had been slaughtering their own friends, for several were stretched, dead or wounded, upon the floor.

Lightning Dick, taking advantage of the confusion, had adroitly made his escape, and curses loud and deep fell from the lips of Black Gaspard as he realized how he had been outwitted.

Directly after reading the warning message, Hurricane Kit left the hotel, and sallied into the street, prepared for anything that might occur.

He was resolved to boldly face his foes, no matter how many and powerful they might be, and to commence with, he intended to hunt for the person who had fired at him the night before, and trail him down if possible.

With this intention, he rapidly made his way up the street, never pausing until he reached the bowlder from behind which the cowardly shot had been fired.

Once there, he commenced a careful search for some trace of the assassin, but he was doomed to disappointment, for the ground in the

vicinity was hard and rocky, and not a foot-print could be distinguished.

Kit uttered an exclamation of disgust. "Baffled at the start, by Heaven!" he muttered. "I can no more pick up the trail of the rascal here, than I could find the traditional needle in the haystack."

Somewhat discouraged at being thwarted so soon, the young man glanced undecidedly about him.

Suddenly a gleam of satisfaction flashed in his eyes, as, darting forward, he picked up an object that had hitherto escaped his observation.

It was a small silver button of peculiar shape and design, and it was with the utmost satisfaction that Hurricane Kit put it carefully away in his pocket, for he now possessed a clew.

The owner of the button, he reasoned, was the man of whom he was in search; therefore, the first step was to find that personage.

This he determined to do without delay, and accordingly was about to retrace his steps to the camp, for he was now on the outskirts near the gloomy precincts of Death Canyon, when suddenly he was startled by a loud scream, that rung out on the clear morning air with startling distinctness.

It was unmistakably a woman's voice, and the young man was instantly on the *qui vive*.

As he listened the sound was repeated, coming from beyond a sharp bend in the pass, and without an instant's hesitation, he darted forward, drawing a revolver as he ran.

Rounding the turn in the trail, Kit came upon a scene which caused his blood to boil.

A short distance away, a young lady was struggling with a burly ruffian, and a cry of anger burst from the lips of the youth, as he dashed boldly forward to the rescue.

The scoundrel saw him coming, and abandoning his evil designs, turned to flee, at the same time drawing a weapon and firing at the advancing youth.

The bullets sped harmlessly by the head of Hurricane Kit, who, with the rapidity of lightning, raised his revolver and sent a shot in return.

He fired in a hurry, almost without taking aim, but, nevertheless, the bullet took effect, striking the fleeing man in the leg and causing him to fall like a log.

Ere he could rise from the earth, Kit stood over him with leveled weapon.

"Get up, you scoundrel!" he ordered sternly. "Come, stand up, and let's have a look at you!"

The ruffian, who was a brawny, murderous-looking specimen of humanity, sullenly did as directed, and stood cowering before his young conqueror.

"It would serve you just right to shoot you like a dog," declared Kit, after looking sternly upon his captive for a moment. "However, I'm inclined to be merciful, and I'll give you a chance for your life. Skip, now, and if you're within range in ten seconds, I'll riddle your infernal carcass with bullets. Start!"

The fellow was only too glad to get off so easily, and he made himself scarce as quickly as his injured limb would allow.

Hurricane Kit watched him until he disappeared from sight, and then turned to the young lady, who had remained near by.

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed the maiden, who was no other than Cora Castleton, the banker's daughter. "How can I thank you for your interference in my behalf?"

"By simply saying nothing about it, miss," responded Kit, with a light laugh. "Permit me to escort you to your stopping-place, for this is scarcely a fit place for ladies, alone and unprotected, as you have already learned by experience."

The girl gladly acquiesced, and the couple turned their steps in the direction of the town.

On the way Cora explained that she and her father were stopping at the hotel, and that she had come out for a morning walk, as had been her custom in her Eastern home, little dreaming of danger.

The young lady proved to be a brilliant conversationalist, and entertained her companion on the way with a constant flow of bright and witty remarks; indeed, the young man was charmed by the beauty and grace of his fair acquaintance.

The so-called hotel was soon reached—too soon, in fact, for Kit, for in the society of the fair girl he for the time forgot his troubles and danger; he would not have objected to walking all day by her side.

Charles Castleton was standing upon the

Black Buckskin.

steps of the hotel, anxiously awaiting the return of his daughter, and his brow grew as black as a thunder-cloud when he beheld her accompanied by a perfect stranger.

However, a few words from Cora speedily explained matters, and the banker extended to Kit a hearty welcome.

The youth was invited inside, and, by their united efforts, speedily made to feel at home.

Some time was spent in pleasant conversation, and then the young man, remembering that stern work was before him, took his departure, promising, however, to call again at the earliest opportunity.

Hurricane Kit leisurely made his way down the street. His thoughts were on the pretty banker's daughter, and he scarcely heeded what was taking place near him.

Suddenly he heard the hum of excited voices, and, looking up, he was surprised to see that the street ahead was filled with armed men.

The mob was about two hundred yards away, and surging down the street toward him, the men waving their arms and shouting wildly.

Hurricane Kit stopped and curiously eyed the approaching rabble.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "Something's in the wind. What can have happened to so greatly agitate the worthy cits of Bullion City?"

Just then a man sprang from behind a neighboring cabin.

It was Jonathan Jinks, the countryman, and he hurriedly approached the spot where Kit was standing.

"Skoot, pard!" he warned, in a low voice. "Them durned galoots are after yeou. Skip, I tell yeou!"

And the next moment he had vanished.

Kit was startled by the intelligence, and instantly he recalled the mysterious warning message of the morning.

"After me, are they?" he muttered, his teeth closing with a determined snap. "Well, they'll find me at home, and will meet with a hot reception."

And backing against the wall of the shanty, with his hands resting conveniently near his revolvers, he resolutely waited for the angry mob.

CHAPTER V.

SNATCHED FROM DEATH.

Down the street tore the excited citizens, filling the air with angry yells, which were increased at sight of Hurricane Kit.

The latter was convinced, now, that he was the cause of this unexpected movement, although he could not conjecture the reason for the uprisal.

Most men would have shrunk from such heavy odds, but daring Kit was determined to face the music.

Cool and unconcerned, to all outward appearances, he stood there, but there was something in his flashing eyes and the manner in which he fingered his weapons, that foreboded danger to his foes.

On rushed the crowd, knives and pistols brandished in the air.

It took them but a brief space to reach a spot twenty yards from the cabin, and then came a sharp click-click! as Hurricane Kit drew his revolvers and turned them upon the mob.

"Back, there!" commanded the young rover, in a ringing voice. "Advance another step, and sure death will shake hands with some of you. Take warning!"

There was no doubt that the youth at bay would put his threat into execution, and as the men comprising the exposed portion of the crowd had no particular relish for a diet of bullets, they discreetly hesitated and came to a halt.

"What kind of a picnic do you call this, gentlemen?" continued Kit, with the utmost coolness. "You seem to be in a great hurry to see me. In what manner can I serve you?"

A man pushed his way through the crowd, and Hurricane Kit gave a low whistle as he recognized Black Gaspard.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "The Gambler King has a hand in this, I see."

With a wave of his hand, Black Gaspard stilled the murmuring of his followers.

"Hurricane," he cried, "I call upon you to surrender in the name of the law. If you are wise, you will lay down your arms and submit, for we mean to take you, dead or alive."

The young adventurer greeted this speech with a sneering laugh.

"My friends," he exclaimed, coolly, "your cheek is immense. What, pray, is the charge on which you propose to arrest me?"

"I can soon enlighten you on that point,"

said Gaspard, grimly. "You see, you are suspected of being connected with the road-agents; in fact, we are more than half-convinced that you are Lightning Dick himself. Therefore the citizens of this town, feeling that your room is preferable to your company, have kindly arranged a little neck-tie party for your benefit."

At these ominous words Hurricane Kit gave vent to a low exclamation.

He saw it all now; it was a cunning plot to get rid of him, and Black Gaspard was the prime mover in it.

With such overwhelming odds against him, the youth, brave as he was, could but feel that his position was an extremely critical one.

But his brave heart quailed not, as he faced his foe with flashing eyes and nerves of steel.

"I see your game, Black Gaspard," he cried, in ringing tones, "but let me tell you, now and here, that it won't work. I have you covered, my festive gambler, and upon the first threatening movement on the part of your gang, I'll riddle your black heart with bullets. So you see the advisability of calling off your bloodhounds."

The Gambler King made no reply, but bit his lip savagely.

It was plain that Hurricane Kit, to use the vernacular of the West, had the deadwood on him.

It required only a sudden rush to overpower the youth by mere superiority of numbers, but Black Gaspard was not fool enough to order such a rush, with the threatening muzzle of a revolver staring him in the face.

A moment passed in painful silence, and the positions of the two parties remained unchanged.

Suddenly, however, there was a diversion.

One of the rearmost men in the crowd had crept, unobserved, to the rear of the cabin, and now he made his appearance upon the roof, directly above Kit's head.

A triumphant gleam shot into the eyes of Black Gaspard, as he noted the position of his shrewd satellite, while Hurricane Kit continued to hold his enemies at bay, all unconscious of what was transpiring behind him.

He was first made aware of the presence of his new foe, when the latter, with the agility of a wildcat, came down upon his shoulders with a force that knocked him to the earth, his weapons flying from his hands.

Although completely taken by surprise, Kit grappled fiercely with his assailant, but the crowd rushed up with cries of exultation, and the brave youth was quickly overpowered.

Kit took his capture coolly, not deigning to respond to the taunts of his triumphant foes.

Without loss of time, he was hurried through the street to where a rope was already rigged over the limb of a tree.

Black Gaspard meant to make the most of his victory, and dispose of his young foe without delay.

There was no pretence to a trial; indeed, the young adventurer did not expect one. He had seen Judge Lynch operate before, and knew full well what the sequel of his capture would be.

The noose was placed about his neck, and a dozen men stood ready to haul on the rope.

It was a scene to be remembered—the pushing, surging crowd of fierce armed men, looking with gloating eyes upon their helpless captive, eager to see him launched into eternity; the Gambler King, stern and grim as fate; the youth, himself, cool and collected, in spite of the terrible doom that menaced him, meeting the fierce glances of his enemies with a smile of scorn.

With a fiendish smile upon his villainous face, Black Gaspard gave the word, and the next moment a dozen eager hands elevated Hurricane Kit into the air.

At this instant there came a crash of pistol shots, and the ruffians grasping the rope suddenly released their hold and fell to the earth.

At the same time a body of masked horsemen, led by a slender youth in somber black, thundered down upon the scene, yelling like fiends; with the reins between their teeth, and a revolver in either hand, they charged right into the midst of the assembled citizens, firing recklessly to the right and left, as fast as they could pull trigger.

Black Gaspard uttered a furious oath.

"Confusion!" he cried. "The road-agents are upon us! Fight, men, and beat off the infernal hounds!"

But the citizens of Bullion City were surprised and bewildered by this sudden turn of affairs, and were swept back before that impetuous dash like chaff before the wind.

There was a moment of tumult and confusion, and then the daring riders separated themselves from the melee, and, with taunting shouts,

dashed swiftly away in the direction of Death Canyon, bearing Hurricane Kit in their midst.

The latter had been suddenly caught up by a burly road-agent, across whose saddle-bow he was now held, somewhat bewildered by the confusion around him.

He comprehended, however, the character of his rescuers, though he made no attempt to free himself, for, he thought, the road-agents were friendly toward him, else they would not have exerted themselves in his behalf.

Supported by the strong arm of the outlaw, Kit was borne along at a rapid rate of speed; rugged walls of rock frowned on either hand, showing that he was in the gloomy precincts of Death Canyon.

The stronghold of the road-agents was undoubtedly their destination, but the youth was little concerned regarding his safety; no situation could possibly be worse than the one from which he had just been released.

The masked band rode at a rapid gallop, although there was no necessity for haste, the citizens of the camp being too confused to pursue them.

Two miles were quickly traversed, and then the road-agents drew rein.

Kit was somewhat surprised to see them halt here, for there was apparently no means of egress from the canyon at that point; however, his eyes were opened a moment later, when one of the road-agents pushed aside a dense mass of vines and bushes, revealing a narrow opening in the mountain wall.

A rough, half-beaten trail wound its tortuous way up the side of the mountain, and along this the outlaws, dismounting, slowly made their way in single file, leading their animals.

It was hard and wearisome labor climbing the steep, rocky slope, but the end of the journey was soon reached.

Hurricane Kit realized that he was within the outlaws' stronghold, and he could but acknowledge that they had selected an excellent place.

It was a narrow plateau upon the top of the mountain, to which the only approach was by the narrow trail alluded to; a natural breast-work of rocks bordered the level space, and behind this a dozen determined men could repel ten times that number of invaders.

However, it was hardly likely that such an event would ever take place, for the opening at the canyon was so well concealed that it was doubtful if it were ever discovered, unless by merest accident.

Two large substantially-built cabins gave one the impression that the road-agents had come to stay, and meant to make themselves as comfortable as possible.

To an inner apartment in the smallest of these, Hurricane Kit was conducted by one of the bandits, who directed him to remain there until the coming of the captain.

The young adventurer threw himself into a seat, lighted a cigar, and serenely waited for Lightning Dick to show himself.

Glancing out of the narrow window, he saw that the road-agents, having cared for their horses, were proceeding to enjoy themselves after their exciting ride.

They had removed their masks, but it was to be noted that their faces were those of honest men, rather than of robbers and cut-throats.

Hurricane Kit observed this with some surprise.

"Dash me!" he muttered. "This is the most decent looking set of agents I ever struck. I'm anxious to see their boss, minus his mask. Ha! Think of a certain personage, and he's always around!"

As he spoke, the door opened, and the lithe form of Lightning Dick stood before him.

CHAPTER VI.

LIGHTNING DICK AT HOME.

It was with feelings of curiosity that Kit looked upon the dare-devil road-agent, whose name was the terror of that region.

His form was that of a youth of twenty, well-built and graceful, set off to the highest advantage, by the neat, close-fitting suit of buckskin, dyed a somber black.

Black gloves incased his hands, which were small and delicate as those of a woman, while a wide-brimmed sombrero of the same hue was placed jauntily on his head.

A dark mask entirely concealed his face, much to the disappointment of Hurricane Kit, who was curious to see the countenance of the famous outlaw.

The aspect of the road-agent, attired as he was in black from head to foot, was gloomy and forbidding in the extreme.

"Well, my friend," he exclaimed, in tones clear and musical, as he advanced into the room, "how are you feeling after your rough usage?"

Kit laughed lightly.

"As well as could be expected," he responded, coolly. "Much better, in fact, than I would have felt, had it not been for your fortunate arrival."

"Ay, you scarcely seemed to be enjoying yourself when we cut you down," said Lightning Dick, grimly.

"It was a close call for me, I'll allow, and I owe my life to you. Although outlaws are hardly to my taste, yet the man who saves my life, be he whom he may, deserves and shall have my everlasting gratitude. Shake!"

While speaking, Hurricane Kit had risen to his feet, and now he extended his hand, which was quickly accepted by the road-agent chief.

But even as they shook hands, a sudden suspicion crossed the mind of the young rover, who instantly stepped back a pace.

Lightning Dick observed the sudden change, but ere he could speak, Kit bluntly hastened to explain.

"Perhaps I'm a fool to shake hands with you, after all," he said, candidly. "This may be a case of jumping from the frying-pan into the fire. Possibly you are my enemy, and if such is the case, my position is only changed from bad to worse."

"Possibly!" echoed the chief, and there was a tinge of scorn in his tones. "Would I have been to so much trouble to save you, had I not been friendly?"

"Perhaps; if you had some object to attain by so doing," answered Kit, bluntly.

There was a moment of silence, which the young adventurer was the first to break.

"It may be that I wrong you, Lightning Dick," he said, plainly, "but it's natural for me to express my opinions, no matter what the result may be. It seems deuced strange to me that a road-agent should risk his own life and those of his men to aid a perfect stranger. What's your little game, anyhow?"

"You're shooting wide, my friend, for I'm up to no game. I rescued you simply because you are an enemy to Black Gaspard, and, consequently, are my friend."

There was a spiteful venom in the tones of the outlaw, as he mentioned the name of the Gambler King, and a low exclamation of satisfaction escaped the lips of Hurricane Kit.

"So, it seems, you have no particular liking for that light-fingered pasteboard-slinger," he remarked, carelessly.

"I hate the venomous snake," hissed the outlaw, his eyes glowing through the holes in his mask like balls of fire.

A brief silence ensued, then Lightning Dick added:

"Come, Hurricane Kit, you are a brave man, and one to my liking. Sit down, and I will tell you *why* I hate Black Gaspard. Perhaps, when I am through, you will have more confidence in me than you now have."

The outlaw took a seat as he spoke, and Kit carelessly did likewise.

"Fire away!" he exclaimed. "I'm all ears—in a figurative sense, I mean."

Without delay Lightning Dick began:

"About a year ago, I, in company with my father, being compelled by reverses to leave our home in the East, came to this country, hoping to rebuild our fortune. At this time the gold-fever was at its height, and men were scouring the hills and gulches on every hand; and we hastened to join the host of eager, toiling prospectors.

"For a time luck was decidedly against us, but at last, down in yonder gulch, where now stands Bullion City, we 'struck oil' with a vengeance.

"The auriferous metal abounded there—a dozen fortunes to be had for the digging. We went to work at once, staking out a claim, and our prospects were rosy, to say the least.

"But disaster was in store for us. Scarcely a week had elapsed since the discovery of the gulch, when a band of ruffians, led by him whom you now know as Black Gaspard, rode up to our cabin.

"They laid claim to the premises, and ordered us to leave. Of course my father refused, and upon their attempt to eject us, met them with a volley of cold lead. But the exertions of two were of no avail against a dozen, and though we succeeded in downing several of the desperadoes, we were soon overpowered, I uninjured, but father bleeding from a dozen wounds.

"Angered at the loss of his men, Black Gaspard ordered him, wounded as he was, to be tied

to a tree, some distance away, and there he was left to the mercy of the wolves and buzzards."

At this point, the speaker's utterance became choked, and he seemed overcome by emotion, but he rallied with an effort, and continued his story.

"I managed to escape from the ruffians, but could find no trace of my father, and gave him up as dead. From that moment my sole purpose in life was to avenge his death, and recover the property so cruelly wrested from our possession.

"I happened to meet with a party of prospectors—rough but honest men—and to them I told my story. They readily agreed to aid me, and I soon made up my mind what course to pursue. With those men forming the nucleus of my now powerful band, I returned to this place, bent on vengeance.

"When I arrived here I found a great change had taken place. A busy town had sprung up, and everything was bustle and confusion. Black Gaspard, I ascertained, had set himself up as general boss of the camp, and was each day adding fresh feathers to his nest.

"Then I, as Lightning Dick, appeared upon the scene, in the role of road-agent, and from that day I have been a thorn in the side of Black Gaspard. But, though I have missed no opportunity to annoy my foe, yet I have never touched a dollar belonging to parties not connected with them. I do my best to seize every ounce of gold that leaves the town, for, surely, it is no crime to take that which, of right, belongs to me.

"However, I am growing tired of this retail business, and before long the day will come when I'll make a wholesale swoop on Bullion City, sweep Black Gaspard and his satellites from existence, and take possession of the town.

"Such, my friend, is my story, and you know now why I am a road-agent. What think you, pard, is Lightning Dick as black as he is painted?"

"I reckon not," replied Hurricane Kit, who had listened with marked attention to the outlaw's tale. "Your course is highly justifiable, under the circumstances. When it comes to rooting out such a rascally gang as that of Black Gaspard, I'm with you every time."

The eyes of the masked youth sparkled.

"Your hand, pard!" he said, simply, and the hands of the couple met in a hearty clasp.

Some time was spent in further conversation, and Kit became every moment more and more interested in the mysterious bandit.

The latter possessed the form of a mere youth, while his voice was rich and musical, but that tantalizing mask effectually concealed every feature, much to the disgust of Hurricane Kit, whose desire to see the outlaw's face was momentarily increasing.

"I should think that mask would be an uncomfortable ornament to wear constantly," he remarked, carelessly.

"Not at all," returned Dick, with a light laugh. "I should feel strange without it. Besides, I make it a rule never to unmask in company."

And so Kit was compelled to restrain his impatience, and remain with his curiosity unsatisfied.

The day wore on, and, despite the secureness of his position, Hurricane Kit began to grow ill at ease.

The gloomy forebodings of impending evil hung over him like a pall; and though he tried to shake them off, he found himself utterly unable to do so.

He thought of Cora Castleton and her father, who were alone in Bullion City, in the midst of lawless men.

It was possible that the evil brain of Black Gaspard might be directed upon this fair maiden; if so, with a gang of equally unscrupulous ruffians at his back, it would be an easy matter for him to accomplish his purpose.

Hurricane Kit was determined to return to the town as soon as morning dawned, and he communicated his intentions to his road-agent friend, who promised to furnish him with a suitable disguise, for it would be madness to venture into camp in his true character.

Filled with anxiety for the safety of the one whom he had begun to love, Kit slept but little that night, and soon as daylight appeared, he prepared to return to Bullion City.

In the disguise of a miner, furnished him by Lightning Dick, he felt secure to go among his enemies, though he was well aware that, if his true identity was discovered, the consequences would be exceedingly unpleasant.

The road-agent chief himself conducted Kit down the mountain to the gulch below, and when the latter point was reached he slipped a

small silver whistle, of peculiar form, into the young adventurer's hand.

"You may be unmasked, and compelled to fight for your life," he explained. "In that case, if you require aid, you have only to sound this whistle. *Adios!*"

So saying, the outlaw turned away, while Hurricane Kit strode rapidly down the canyon, in the direction of the mining-camp.

The little mining-town was thrown into a frenzy of excitement by the bold dash of Lightning Dick's road-agents, and the rescue of their prisoner from under their very noses.

For a brief space after that reckless charge, the worthy "cits" were thrown into deep confusion; when they had recovered their self-possession, it was only to behold the outlaws riding swiftly up the canyon toward their mountain fastness, bearing Hurricane Kit in their midst.

Then it was that the air suddenly grew blue with curses, showered without stint upon the bold knight of the road; and of them all Black Gaspard cursed loudest and longest.

They did not attempt to pursue the fleeing road-agents. They had tried it, once upon a time, with highly disastrous results, and the men of Bullion City valued their lives too highly to again beard Lightning Dick in his lair.

For a time all was confusion, but gradually the excitement abated, and before noon the camp had resumed its wonted appearance.

With a frown upon his dark face, Black Gaspard stalked moodily through the street.

The events of the morning were decidedly not to his liking, and his mood was by no means pleasant.

He was passing by the shaky structure which rejoiced in the title of "hotel," and chancing to look up, he beheld the fair face of Cora Castleton at a window.

An exclamation of mingled surprise and admiration escaped the lips of the gambler.

"The deuce!" he muttered. "A female hyar in Bullion City! Pretty as a picture, too! Guess I'll go in and make a few inquiries of our friend William!"

So remarking, Black Gaspard entered the building.

The only occupant of the bar-room was the proprietor, a burly individual who boasted the rather dubious cognomen of Potato William.

He was evidently a friend of Black Gaspard, for he grinned and nodded as the latter entered.

The gambler lost no time in coming at his point. With his tongue loosened by the persuasive influence of a gold eagle, tossed over the bar, Potato William played the part of a pump to perfection, and soon Black Gaspard was as wise as his informant concerning Charles Castleton and his pretty daughter.

"A banker, eh? and rich as Croesus!" he muttered, as he left the place. "Of course his fair daughter is his sole heir, and—Ha! I think I see a way to increase my pile. Let me think!"

Thus musing, he made his way to his own establishment, and, seeking his private apartment, was soon wrapt in thought and tobacco-smoke.

His evil brain was actively at work, as he puffed vigorously on his cigar, and finally he flung it aside with a low cry of satisfaction, while his dark eyes glittered.

"I have it!" he exclaimed, in triumph. "I'll gain the friendship of the worthy banker, and also the hand of his daughter in marriage. Then, when all is rosy, it will be an easy matter to put the old man out of the way, and pocket the wealth that will then fall to her."

A bold and villainous scheme, truly, and Black Gaspard was the man to put it into execution.

"I'll get to work at once," he soliloquized. "The first step is to call on the banker, play the gentleman, and get an introduction to my fair bride that is to be. Ha, ha!"

Chuckling at the prospect before him, the Gambler King arose, lighted a weed, and sauntered over to the hotel.

Charles Castleton, the banker, received him courteously, but with an ill-concealed look of suspicion, which did not escape the sharp eyes of the visitor.

"Well, sir, what is your business with me?" inquired Castleton, somewhat coldly, after an exchange of courtesies.

It was plain that he was not favorably impressed by his caller.

"My dear sir," said the gambler, suavely, "let me inform you at once. Having heard that you were here for the purpose of opening business, and being a prominent citizen of this place, I thought perhaps I might be of some assistance to you, and so have come to make you

a friendly call. When a man is in a strange land, surrounded by such a rough element as Bullion City boasts, a friend is to be welcomed, is he not?"

The banker nodded in the affirmative.

"I'm obliged to you for your interest in my welfare," he said, "but you are a perfect stranger to me. You say you are prominent here. What is your name, if I may ask?"

The Gambler King bowed low.

"Pardon me for not vouchsafing that information before," he exclaimed. "I am Gaspard Gonzales, mine-owner, at your service."

"Not Black Gaspard?"

"That is what many of these wild men of the mines call me, I believe," laughed the sharper.

Castleton frowned.

He had heard of this personage from the lips of Kit Carroll, and knew the character of the man before him.

"Sir!" he cried, sternly, "if you are the rascal known as Black Gaspard, your presence here is no longer desired. Be your intentions good, bad or indifferent, I care not for the society of a man who is notorious for being a card-sharp and general rogue. There is the door!"

For a moment the gambler could only stare in surprise, so totally unexpected was the banker's speech.

Then a scowl overspread his dark features, while his eyes glittered like those of a serpent as he rose to his feet.

"Sir!" he exclaimed angrily, "be careful what you say. I came to you as a friend, but may leave you as a foe. So, beware!"

"Your enmity is preferable to your friendship," answered Charles Castleton, coldly.

With a muttered curse, Black Gaspard withdrew.

"Curse the luck!" he exclaimed, as he strode moodily down the street. "Some meddling fool has given me a recommendation to the banker, and so he declines the honor of my acquaintance. Ha, ha! Castleton will find that I'm not through with him. There's more ways than one to skin a cat, and this game is too rare to let slip without a struggle. It's a stake worth playing for, and Black Gaspard is bound to win."

And there was a malignant gleam in the snaky orbs of the gambler, that boded no good to the banker and his fair daughter.

CHAPTER VII.

KIT ON THE TRACK.

THE sun was scarcely an hour high, when an individual left Death Canyon and sauntered leisurely into Bullion City.

He was apparently a man of middle age, with tangled hair and a matted beard which concealed the greater part of his features.

Clad in a ragged, mud-bespattered suit, with battered hat and cowhide boots reaching to the knees, he presented the appearance of a roving prospector, "down on his luck."

Yet this person was no other than Hurricane Kit, skillfully disguised.

It was risky to thus venture into the midst of the enemies, from whom he had so narrowly escaped the day before.

If, perchance, his disguise was penetrated, the chances were that he would never leave the camp alive, for the citizens, thanks to the cunning of Black Gaspard, believed him to be a member of Lightning Dick's band, and would speedily mete out Western justice.

No one realized the hazard better than Kit, himself, yet he did not hesitate for a moment.

He had a suspicion that trouble was brewing—in what form he had no definite idea, and he was determined to investigate matters a little.

Leisurely, Kit strolled into the camp, glancing about with apparent indifference, yet he was taking in every movement with observant eyes.

It took him but a brief period to see that something unusual had occurred.

Men were gathered in little knots, excitedly discussing some topic, interspersing their remarks with violent gestures.

Curious to learn the cause of the excitement, Hurricane Kit, feeling secure in his disguise, boldly joined the nearest group.

"Pard!" he exclaimed, gruffly, tapping a miner on the shoulder. "Wo't's ther meanin' ov all this hubbub hyar? Somethin' unusual hez happened, I take it."

"I opine thar hez," answered the miner, who was evidently one of the few honest, law-abiding citizens. "Durn it! Ther place is gettin' wuss an' wuss every day, an' I'm blamed ef I don't pull up stakes an' git, while I've got a hull skin."

"What's the matter?"

"Matter enuff! Thur blamed road-agents paid us another call last night, kicked up general blue blazes, an' then wound up by runnin' off with ther rich banker an' his darter," was the startling announcement of Ben Barker, the miner.

Hurricane Kit uttered a cry of mingled surprise and dismay.

"Is this the truth you are speaking?" he demanded, fiercely clutching the other's arm.

"Sartain!" responded Barker, in surprise.

"Do ye know ther banker?"

Kit saw that in his excitement he had nearly betrayed his identity, but he quickly recovered his customary coolness.

"Yas, I've heard of him," he carelessly said, in answer to the miner's inquiry, and then he sauntered away.

His fears were realized, the girl he loved was in danger; and his brain was busy at work as he paced thoughtfully up the street.

Although greatly astonished by the startling intelligence, he did not allow his self-possession to forsake him, but reasoned with all the coolness that was one of his characteristics.

"Seems to me there's a screw loose somewhere," he muttered. "This happened last night and Lightning Dick is charged with being at the bottom of it. Now, I know for a positive fact that the outlaw and his men remained in their stronghold all night, and, as they could not be in two places at once, it is evident that Lightning Dick's band were *not* the perpetrators of the outrage. Then, who *are* the guilty parties? It's plain to me that there is double-dealing somewhere. I must investigate."

He walked on until he came to a spot where a dense crowd of citizens were listening to a man mounted on a barrel.

It was Black Gaspard, and Kit was soon near enough to hear his words.

"Men of Bullion City," he was saying, "the time has come for action! For weeks and months we have submitted to the outrages of Lightning Dick and his accursed followers, but when it comes to stealing innocent, defenseless people from under our very noses, then it is time to make a move. We must seek the outlaws in their stronghold, break up their gang, and bring back the banker and his daughter. Let all those who dare, prepare to follow me at once!"

A series of ringing cheers followed the gambler's speech.

Where Black Gaspard led, the citizens of Bullion City would follow.

The result was that the entire population of the town signified its readiness to join in the outlaw hunt.

But the Gambler King saw the advisability of leaving a strong force to guard the camp, in case the road-agents should take a notion to attack it in his absence; so, selecting about fifty men, he set out at once, amid the cheers of the stay-at-homes.

There were two men in the crowd who did not share in the general enthusiasm.

One was Hurricane Kit; the other a tall, bearded man in the garb of a miner, who stood leaning against the side of a cabin close by, intently watching the scene.

A contemptuous smile curled his lip, as he witnessed the starting of the expedition.

"Black Gaspard is cunning. Bah! There's little probability of their bringing back either the banker or his daughter, if *he* leads them."

The stranger thus expressed his opinion, seemingly unconscious that any one was within earshot; but Hurricane Kit heard the sarcastic words, and with a bound he was beside the man who uttered them.

"What's that you say? What do you know about this?" demanded he, impetuously, as he seized the tall stranger by the arm.

The latter wheeled with an oath, and threw up his arm in a vigorous effort to escape the grasp of the other, whose false beard was swept to the ground.

Kit uttered a cry of dismay, which was echoed by the stranger as he sprang back.

"Hurricane Kit, by the eternal!" he gasped.

Quick as a flash the young adventurer replaced his disguise, and seizing the miner, pulled him behind the shanty, out of sight of the citizens, who, fortunately had not witnessed this little episode.

"Who in the deuce are you?" demanded Hurricane Kit, fiercely.

The stranger smiled.

"Jonathan Jinks, at your service," he said, quietly. "Ye see, pard, it warn't very healthy fur me ter show myself after what happened, for, bein' a friend ov yours, it was likely ther

varmints 'd string me up to ther nearest tree, to make up for ther loss ov yer. Not bein' particularly ambitious ter ornament a limb, I jest changed my rig an' kept mum. Was jest a-wonderin' where ye was, an' calculatin' on ther probabilities o' yer showin' up ag'in in these diggin's. Mighty glad ter see ye, pard. Shake!"

The voluble countryman held out a brawny hand, which Kit shook warmly.

"I'm pleased to meet with you again," he said. "It's somewhat consoling to feel that you have even one friend in such a place as this. But, pard, you just made some remark about this expedition. Do you know anything about the affair of last night?"

Eagerly he asked the question, and Jonathan replied promptly.

"Dew I know anything about it? Wal, that depends. Are yeou a friend ov theirs!"

"I'm happy to say that I am."

"That settles it, then. I dew know jest a leetle about ther scrape."

Hurricane Kit uttered an exclamation of impatience.

"For Heaven's sake, man, don't keep me in suspense, but tell me all you know. Can't you see that I am burning with impatience?"

Jonathan Jinks, without further delay, proceeded to tell his story, the substance of which we give below in our own words.

About dark, the night before, while rambling in the outskirts of the camp, with no particular object in view, he suddenly came upon two men engaged in conversation. One of these men was Black Gaspard, and the other a burly ruffian whom he had seen in the town several times before.

Suspecting that some mischief was being concocted, Jonathan became curious to learn the subject of the conversation. Accordingly, he advanced stealthily, and succeeded in reaching a point close to the plotting pair, without his presence being suspected by them.

From behind a sheltering bowlder, he heard every word that was uttered. Black Gaspard ordered his companion to collect "the boys," abduct the banker and his daughter, and carry them to the rendezvous, there to await his further orders. The whereabouts of the rendezvous the eavesdropper could not ascertain.

Then the Gambler King and his satellite took their departure, luckily without discovering Jinks, who was left alone to ponder over what he had heard. He was not long in making up his mind what course to pursue. There were a few honest men in Bullion City, and he determined to solicit their aid in defending the contemplated victims of the midnight raid.

But "the best-laid plans of mice and men gang aft aglee," and so it was with our friend, Jonathan Jinks.

Scarcely had he risen from his place of concealment, when he received a terrible blow on the head from behind, that stretched him, stunned and bleeding upon the earth.

He was recalled to his senses by the sunlight streaming down upon his face. Nothing was to be seen of his late assailant, whose object had evidently been robbery, as Jonathan's pockets were rifled of their contents.

Without loss of time, Jinks hurried into camp, only to find that he was too late. The abduction had been accomplished, and the citizens were loud in their denunciations of the road-agents, whom they believed to be the perpetrators of the outrage; and this belief Black Gaspard, who was at the bottom of it all, cunningly strengthened.

Such was the narration of the countryman, which Hurricane Kit eagerly listened to.

When Jinks had ceased talking, the young man stood for fully a minute, without speaking, deeply wrapt in thought.

Finally he looked up.

"Jonathan," he exclaimed, "this gambler is up to some deep game. He has in his possession a young lady for whom I would risk everything. I must rescue her and her father from the villainous clutches of Black Gaspard, or die in the attempt. Pard, can I look to you for assistance?"

Jinks's reply was characteristic.

"Pard," he exclaimed, "kin a fish swim? Yeou kin count on me, through thick and thin!"

"Good!"

And once more the two men shook hands, as if to bind the bargain.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GAMBLER KING FINDS HIS FOE.

WHEN Black Gaspard left Bullion City with a picked body of citizens, ostensibly to hunt for

Lightning Dick's band, he in reality had no intention of inviting a conflict with those notorious knights of the road.

He meant to lead them among the hills and gulches for a few hours, and then return to the town; whether they found the road-agents or not (and the gambler heartily hoped that they would not), he would have the credit of boldly leading the expedition on the hazardous errand.

What Black Gaspard wanted was to raise himself higher in the estimation of his fellow-citizens, for he fully appreciated the advantage of being popular in a western mining-town.

Besides, he did not wish to betray, by any indifference on his part, the fact that he was in any manner connected with the bold abduction of the previous night.

It was a keen game, and Black Gaspard was playing his cards shrewdly.

For some time the gambler led his men aimlessly about; then, when the declining sun gave evidence that the day was nearly spent, he ordered a halt.

"Men," he said, "we have hunted nearly all day, but are apparently no nearer to the outlaws than when we started. They have covered their trail with the cunning of Sioux, and my opinion is we might as well try to catch a shadow. We will return to camp."

His words were greeted with a cheer, for the outlaw-hunters had for some time been of their leader's opinion.

To tell the truth, that tramp had had the effect of dampening their ardor considerably, and they only needed their commander's word to take the back track with an alacrity which far surpassed that with which they had entered upon the enterprise.

Back they went, therefore, at no slow pace, for fantastic shadows had already begun to fill the gloomy recesses of Death Canyon, while vague fears took possession of the men from Bullion City.

It was an admirable place for an ambush, and the citizens looked askance at every shadow, lest it should prove to be a foe.

Even the bold gambler was a trifle uneasy, and acknowledged to himself that he should feel safer were he in his own apartments at the Gambler's Paradise.

On marched the men of Bullion City, the tramp of their feet being the only sound that broke the gloomy silence.

"Halt!"

Sharp and clear the stern command rung out upon the air, and the startled outlaw-hunters looked uneasily around them.

No one was to be seen; but the next instant the command was repeated:

"Halt there, men of Bullion City!"

This time there was no mistaking the direction whence came the voice, and looking up, the men in the canyon saw the very man for whom they had been all day searching—Lightning Dick.

Standing upon a rocky projection far above them, with his arms carelessly folded across his breast, and his eyes glittering through the holes in his mask, the young outlaw looked complacently down upon his foes below him.

"So you seek Lightning Dick!" he laughed. "You shall not be disappointed. Here he stands. What is your pleasure?"

The answer he received was more forcible than polite.

Drawing his revolver with a lightning-like movement, Black Gaspard fired thrice in succession at the lithe form of the road-agent outlined against the rocky wall.

With a mocking laugh Lightning Dick suddenly disappeared, while the leaden missiles pattered against the rocks where he had just stood.

The next moment the outlaw-chief again reappeared.

"You fools! You have come to seek Lightning Dick, and you shall meet with a warm reception!"

Ominously the words fell upon the ears of the men from Bullion City, and they were immediately followed by the sound of a shrill whistle.

Quickly came an answering signal from the rear; then there was a clatter of hoofs, a chorus of fierce yells, and then a compact body of masked riders swept down upon the dismayed party.

The Gambler King was the only one among the crowd from Bullion City who retained his self-possession.

His voice rung out above the yells of the advancing road-agents like that of a lion.

"Fire on 'em, boys!" he yelled. "Fight like blazes an' drive 'em back. We outnumber 'em, two to one, an' can wipe out the whole gang."

The miners obeyed, but they were excited, and their shots flew wild.

Then came a return volley, which laid several of their number low.

That was enough for the demoralized citizens, who turned and fled, pell-mell, in the direction of Bullion City, Black Gaspard being carried along by the tide.

After them thundered the road-agents, yelling like Indians, firing their revolvers recklessly in the air, and enjoying the fun at the top of their bent.

Down the canyon raced the terror-stricken miners, panting like dogs, and wildly throwing away their weapons as they ran, while the dreaded outlaws thundered close at their heels.

It was a never-to-be-forgotten dash, and if ever human being was thankful, then were these same citizens, when, half-dead from fright and exhaustion, they came within sight of Bullion City.

The entire population, alarmed by the firing, turned out to meet them, and they saw at a glance that the expedition had not been a success.

Jonathan Jinks chuckled grimly, as he prodded Kit, good-naturedly.

"So Black Gaspard *did* find ther road-riders, in spite of himself," he remarked.

"Or, rather, *they* found *him*," corrected the disguised youth, laughing at the ludicrous aspect presented by the terrified "cits," as they raced into camp in a manner decidedly at contrast with the way they had left it a few hours previous.

There was a grand rally of citizens to protect the camp from the invading road-agents, but this proved unnecessary.

After pursuing the flying miners to the very edge of the town, the daring knights of the road wheeled their horses, and, with taunting shouts, dashed away toward the mountain stronghold.

It was night in Bullion City—the evening following the events just recorded.

Few persons were out; most of the population had sought the various saloons and gambling-dens that ornamented the town, there to talk over the exciting events of the day as they sipped their liquid lightning, or to try their luck at the gaming-table.

Black Gaspard's place, the Gambler's Paradise, received the greatest patronage, and there we would take the reader.

Both rooms were filled to overflowing with men of all classes—gamblers, adventurers, miners, and ruffianly loafers, the latter being decidedly in the majority.

Among the rest were the heroes (?) of the man-hunting expedition, striving to drown the disgrace of their defeat by imbibing liberal quantities of fiery mountain dew.

The Gambler King was not to be seen. He was too nervous to take his customary place at the card-table, for a flying bullet had cut along his cheek during that mad retreat, making a wound which, though not dangerous, was painful enough to considerably increase his irritability.

It is needless to say that Hurricane Kit and his friend were among the patrons of the Gambler's Paradise.

Feeling quite secure in their disguise, they moved leisurely in and out of the crowd, keeping near to each other that they might better guard against danger, and taking in every object with observant eyes.

For, in spite of his apparently indifferent attitude, Hurricane Kit was there on business.

He was looking for the man who had tried to shoot him on the night of his entrance into Bullion City—for the owner of the silver button, which he had picked up the following morning.

The assassin, he reasoned, was one of Black Gaspard's hirelings, and, therefore, was likely to know the whereabouts of Charles Castleton and his daughter.

Indeed, he might be one of the party who, under the gambler's orders, accomplished the abduction.

This fellow once found and in his power, Kit felt that, either by threats or bribery, he could be induced to reveal the location of the rendezvous, where his friends were held prisoners.

It was with the intention of finding this person, whoever he might be, that Hurricane Kit, accompanied by Jonathan Jinks, paid a visit to the Gambler's Paradise.

His only clew was the silver button, and the young man realized that it was not so easy a task as it seemed to be; even if he found the would-be assassin, it was another thing to inveigle him into their power without alarming his friends.

But Kit possessed an indomitable will, and was determined to accomplish his purpose by some means.

Moving carelessly through the crowd, the young adventurer closely scrutinized every man who came under his notice, though not appearing to do so.

In this way he passed from one end of the building to the other, and back again, but saw no one whose buttons matched that in his possession.

The man for whom he sought was conspicuous for his absence.

Hurricane Kit turned away disappointed.

"He's not here, that's certain," he said to Jinks, in a cautious undertone. "We must look for him in the other places."

Our two friends were about to leave the saloon, when an unexpected interruption took place.

There was a confused shuffling of feet, as the door flew open, and an individual staggered into the room.

He was a stalwart six-footer of the ruffian type, roughly clad, and armed to the teeth.

It was evident that he was out "on a tear," and those who stood in his way discreetly fell back to give him room.

The drunken ruffian pranced into the room, wildly brandishing his arms above his head.

"Whoop!" he yelled. "I'm Cinnamon Jake from Pistolville, an' I'm out on the war-path, chock-full ter ther muzzle. Out er ther way, pilgrims, fur thar's blood in my eye, an' I'm a bad man when my dander's riz. Ker-whoop! Ouch!"

As the bad man from Pistolville finished his announcement, he attempted to execute a double-shuffle, but the exertion proved too much for him, and, losing his balance, he sought the floor with a force that shook the building.

As he fell, he threw out his arms in a wild endeavor to recover his equilibrium, and Hurricane Kit, who stood close by, narrowly escaped disaster.

"Careful, you clumsy lout!" cried the youth, angrily, as he maintained his balance with an effort. "Don't fling yourself round quite so promiscuous, if you please."

With a growl of rage, Cinnamon Jake gained his feet.

"What's that ye say?" he demanded savagely, as he danced up to our friend. "Me thinks I heerd yer gentle voice waftin' a leetle bit of advice over in my direction. Wheop! Durn ye! I'm cock-o'-the-walk, an' the galoot w'ot slings his lip at me hez got ter chaw dirt. You bet!"

Standing with his arms carelessly folded, Kit looked contemptuously upon the swaggering rough.

"It's my opinion that you'd better bottle up your chin-music," he remarked, coolly. "You're drunk, my friend, and I advise you to go outside and cool off. You might accidentally get hurt, and then your mother would mourn the untimely taking-off of her handsome son. Take my advice, Jacob, and go home to your ma."

A yell of applause followed this sarcastic speech, while as for the bruiser, himself, his bloated face turned fairly livid with wrath.

"Kerwhoop! I'll show ye!" he yelled. "Durn ye! I'll chaw ye inter shoe-strings."

And he rushed forward, bent on executing his threat.

Then the iron fist of Hurricane Kit shot out like lightning, and a million stars suddenly seemed to float before the eyes of the tough from Pistolville, who instantly assumed an attitude of repose in a manner more forcible than elegant.

For a moment he lay there, half-stunned by the blow; then, with a roar like that of a mad bull, he leaped to his feet and rushed upon the smiling youth who had caused his downfall.

So impetuous was his rush that Kit could not avoid it, and the next moment the two were locked in a fierce embrace.

Then ensued a brief but desperate struggle for the mastery, which was ended by both combatants falling together.

Cinnamon Jake was undermost, and his head struck the floor with a force that deprived him of consciousness, while Hurricane Kit, triumphant, leaped to his feet, none the worse for the encounter.

As he did so, a threatening murmur arose from the assembled crowd.

During the struggle with the ruffian, Kit's disguise had been torn off, and now he stood revealed in his true character to the gaze of the astonished occupants of the saloon.

It took the young adventurer but an instant to comprehend how matters stood.

He realized that his position was a desperate

one, but not for a moment did his nerve forsake him.

As the citizens, recovering from their surprise, sprung eagerly forward to seize him, he leaped agilely to one side, and with his back against the wall and a revolver in either hand, boldly faced the crowd.

"Back!" he cried, in ringing tones. "Death awaits the first man who advances."

At the same time, Jonathan Jinks took his place by the side of his partner; he said nothing, but his revolvers were leveled, and there was a determined gleam in his eyes that showed he was ready for business.

In spite of the heavy odds in their favor, the citizens hesitated; it needed only a determined rush to overpower the bold couple by mere superiority of numbers, but such a rush meant death to some of them, and they were in no wise anxious to face the storm of bullets that would greet the first hostile movement on their part.

So they stood undecided, and there was a minute of silence so deep that one might hear a pin drop.

During this brief interval, the brain of Hurricane Kit was busily at work.

Their position was a hazardous one, for a score of armed men were between them and the door, and Kit felt that, though they might keep back their foes for a time, the result would be capture.

But suddenly he thought of the whistle given him by Lightning Dick; now was the time to test its virtues, and Kit instantly pulled it from his pocket and blew with all his might.

Loud and shrill rung out the signal, echoing and re-echoing from the walls of the room, and the result astonished the youth as much as it did the crowd of ruffians.

Scarcely had the last echo died away, when every window-sill became the resting-place for half a dozen rifles, the black muzzles of which frowned ominously upon the startled occupants of the saloon.

Then from the outside, terse and stern, came the command:

"Hands up!"

It is needless to say that the citizens of Bullion City promptly obeyed this sharp order; they could not well do otherwise with death staring them in the face.

With scowling faces, they stood with hands elevated, patiently awaiting developments.

Our two friends were greatly pleased at this fortunate turn of affairs.

"You see, gents," remarked Hurricane Kit, coolly, "that I am well protected. Sorry I cannot oblige you by remaining, but I must go, now. Tra-la-la!"

With this speech, he backed slowly out of the room, closely followed by Jinks, while the baffled ruffians, though wild with rage, dared make no attempt to stop them, threatened as they were by nearly a score of deadly rifles.

A moment later, the men on the outside withdrew the siege of their weapons, and the crowd of "cits" made a grand rush for the door.

But nothing was to be seen of Hurricane Kit and his friend, nor of the unknowns who had aided them, and the furious citizens had no alternative but to return, which they did, soothing their ruffled tempers with liberal quantities of fiery tanglefoot.

CHAPTER IX.

ON THE TRAIL.

TEN minutes later, two men were skulking in the darkness, at the edge of the mining-camp.

They were our two friends, Kit Carroll and Jonathan Jinks.

"Confound that Cinnamon Jake!" the young adventurer exclaimed. "He turned up just in time to spoil our plans."

"The durned skunk!" growled the countryman, indignantly. "Ef I only hed him hyar, I'd give him ther wu'st lambastin' he ever tuck sence his mammy uster fetch him over her checkered apron."

"Well," remarked Kit philosophically, "what can't be cured must be endured. There's no material harm done; however, we can't continue our search until I procure a different disguise."

"That's a fact, sure as shootin', pard," assented Jinks. "Et wouldn't work worth a cent ter go back ter camp in thet same rig. Ha! W'ot on earth's thet?"

A low, long-drawn sound was suddenly wafted on the breeze to their ears, and both men listened attentively.

"It sounds like a groan," whispered Hurricane Kit. "Let's investigate."

Cautiously they proceeded in the direction of the sound, their pistols ready for instant use.

There was no cause for alarm, however, for the sound resolved itself into an unmistakable snore, and soon our friends came upon the author of the musical disturbance.

Behind a sheltering rock, a man lay stretched out at full length, sleeping off the effects of too much bad whisky.

By the light of a match, Hurricane Kit closely scrutinized the unconscious man.

He was evidently a Mexican, and his face was that of a ruffian and cut-throat, with the gallows stamped on every feature.

But neither the face nor the form of the drunken sleeper interested Kit, who was gazing intently at the gaudy jacket, from which one button was missing; the buttons on the coat were the exact counterparts of the one in the youth's possession.

As he made this discovery, Kit leaped to his feet with a glad cry.

"Pard!" he exclaimed. "Our game is found."

"Ther deuce, yeou say!" was Jonathan Jinks's elegant ejaculation. "Wal, ef this ain't luck!"

"It is, decidedly so," said the youth, in elation. "Everything has turned out for the best. Had it not been for Cinnamon Jake, we would now be hunting for our man among the saloons of the town."

Jonathan grinned.

"No thanks ter Jacob. Howsumdever, I'll fergive ther critter, an' shake his hand next time we meet instead o' kickin' him. But, say! What'll we dew with this p'izen imp, now thet we've got him safely corraled?"

"We must take him to some secluded spot, where we will be secure from discovery by our foes. Then, when he sobers up, if he knows anything about this affair, he must be made to tell."

Jonathan nodded approvingly.

"Good idea!" he remarked, laconically.

"Come, let us get away from this vicinity without further delay," urged Hurricane Kit. "Every moment that we remain here we run the risk of being detected by some of those prowling ruffians. It's fortunate that our man is intoxicated, or we might not have secured him without a struggle."

"He's drunker'n a b'iled owl," declared the countryman, who had been inspecting the prostrate Greaser. "We'll hev ter tote him, I opine."

"Exactly. Catch hold, pard!"

He lifted the Mexican by the shoulders, while Jinks caught hold of his legs, and in this manner the fellow was carried along as unceremoniously as if he was a bag of meal.

Our friends kept on until nearly a mile was placed between them and the lights of Bullion City.

Then they came to a halt in a place admirably suited for their purpose.

It was a small pocket in the mountains, flanked on all sides by huge boulders; there was little danger of molestation in this snug retreat.

The Mexican was dumped unceremoniously upon the hard ground, and lay there still snoring melodiously, utterly insensible to his rough usage, while our friends proceeded to collect material for a fire.

Soon a cheerful blaze was started, and then they turned their attention to the prisoner.

The latter was still sleeping like a top, and, seeing that he would not recover from his drunken stupor before morning, the twain sought the rest they so greatly needed, first taking the precaution to bind the captive, lest he might come to his senses during the night, and make himself scarce.

The night passed, and when, at daybreak, our friends awoke, the prisoner was still snorting like a fog-horn.

"Durn me! Ther blamed Greaser ha'n't cum ter life yet," growled Jinks in disgust.

Hurricane Kit looked suspiciously at the sleeper.

"It's my opinion," he said, deliberately, "that the infernal Greaser is shamming, hoping that we'll carelessly untie him, and give him a chance to levant."

The countryman grinned.

"If ther galoot's awake I'll make him show it," he said, grimly.

Going to a spring of water near by, he filled his hat, and then dashed the cold liquid full in the face of the Mexican, who, half-strangled by the deluge, opened his eyes, spluttering and cursing in his native tongue.

Jinks chuckled in delight at the success of his ruse.

"Oh, ho, my yaller-skinned wilcat!" he ob-

served. "I see yeou ain't quite dead after all. Don't take tew water, I reckon."

The prisoner scowled darkly at the speaker, but vouchsafed no reply to his taunting words.

Hurricane Kit could but acknowledge that his captive was an unpromising subject to obtain information from, but he meant to succeed, and with this determination he seated himself by the side of the prostrate Mexican.

"Well, my friend, how are you feeling this morning?" he asked, as an opening remark.

A ferocious scowl was his only reply, but Kit, undaunted, went on:

"Come, there is no use in being sulky. We have you here, and you cannot escape, so you might as well make the best of your situation."

The Greaser uttered a curse.

"Curse you! Why have you brought me here?" he demanded, fiercely.

"That you shall soon know," responded Kit.

"In the first place, do you know who I am?"

"Carajo! Yes! You are the young daredevil they call Hurricane Kit," answered the prisoner, promptly.

Kit laughed.

"Thanks for the compliment," he said.

"Well, now, who are you?"

"I'm called Red Juan," replied the Mexican, sullenly.

"Well, Red Juan, I'm much obliged to you for so kindly trying to kill me the other night," said Kit, keenly watching the face of his prisoner as he spoke.

The Mexican assumed an air of innocence and surprise.

"What do you mean, senor?" he asked.

Hurricane Kit laughed scornfully.

"Bah!" he exclaimed. "Don't try the innocent game on me, for it won't work. You are the man who fired on me from ambush, and there is no use for you to deny it. Now, why did you fire that shot? Did I ever harm you, that you should seek my life?"

For a moment Red Juan was silent.

"You shall know the reason," he said, at last. "My employer hated you, and I thought to gain his favor by ridding him of you. But, carajo! the shot flew wild, and I was foiled. Curses on my luck!"

And the dark face of the assassin wore a look of intense disappointment, so ludicrous that Hurricane Kit laughed amusedly.

"It's a pity you were disappointed," he said, sarcastically, "but the Fates willed it. You spoke of your employer. Who is he—Black Gaspard?"

The prisoner made no reply, but the start he gave told Kit that he had not guessed amiss.

A brief silence ensued, which was broken by Red Juan.

"Well, senor," he said, carelessly, "now that I have answered your questions, am I at liberty to depart? Or do you intend to kill me?"

Hurricane Kit smiled grimly.

"My friend," he exclaimed, "your life depends on yourself. If you truthfully answer the questions I put to you, then you may have your freedom; if not, then something else, more unpleasant, will happen. Do you comprehend?"

Red Juan nodded.

"What do you want to know?" he inquired, sullenly. "Let me tell you I ain't a fountain of universal knowledge."

"Enough so for my purpose," said Kit, grimly; and then he came to the point without further parley. "What I want to know is this: What did Black Gaspard do with the man and girl whom he caused to be abducted last night?"

The Mexican started.

"Caramba! How did you know—?" he began; and then, realizing that he had betrayed himself, he lapsed into a sullen silence.

Kit smiled complacently, for he saw that Red Juan knew all about the abduction.

The next thing was to obtain the desired information.

"My friend," he said, "I've got you gauged, and you had better make a clean breast of it. The sooner you speak, the better it will be for you."

Red Juan scowled.

"Kill me, if you will!" he exclaimed, in dogged defiance. "I cannot betray the secrets of my chief."

He evidently feared the wrath of Black Gaspard more than he did that of the men who held him prisoner.

As for Hurricane Kit, he whipped out a revolver, and pressed the cold muzzle against the temple of the Mexican.

"See here!" he cried, sternly. "I've dallied long enough. I'll give you one minute in which to speak. If your obstinate tongue is not loos-

ened at the end of that time, I'll send a bullet through your brain."

Jonathan Jinks, who had hitherto remained an interested but silent spectator, nodded his approval.

"That's ther talk!" he exclaimed. "Ef ther durned rascal won't talk, blow him inter ther middle o' next week."

Red Juan grew uneasy.

Like most of his nation, he was a coward at heart, and as the seconds flew swiftly by, his air of bravado vanished, and his swarthy face grew pale.

"Time's up!" announced Hurricane Kit. "Last chance! Will you speak?"

There was no mercy shown on his stern, resolute face, and the Greaser wisely yielded, for he had no particular desire to leave the world just then.

"I give in, curse you!" he ejaculated. "You've got the drop, so I may as well own up."

Hurricane Kit smiled approvingly.

"A wise decision, truly," he remarked. "You might have come to that conclusion half an hour ago, and thus saved all this bother. Come, now, where are Charles Castleton and his daughter?"

"We took them to the rendezvous, senor," answered Red Juan.

"And where is that?"

"In a cave in the mountains."

"How far from here?"

"About a mile."

"Can you guide us there?"

"Si, senor!"

"Good!" exclaimed Kit, in elation. "Pard, luck is in our favor."

"You bet!" assented Jonathan Jinks, laconically. "I know'd ther p'izen Greaser'd throw up his keerds when yeou showed a full hand o' sixes."

"That shows the amount of persuasive power in a revolver," laughed Kit.

Our two friends now held a brief consultation.

Both were eager to start for the place where their friends were concealed, but they realized the hazard of moving in daylight, when they were liable at any moment to come in contact with some of their Bullion City enemies.

Therefore, it was deemed advisable to wait until night, and move under the cover of darkness.

The day dragged slowly away, each minute seeming an hour to the young adventurer, who was impatient to start to the rescue of the girl he loved.

The countryman shared his companion's anxiety.

But night came at last, and our friends made preparations for embarking on their enterprise.

Red Juan was set at liberty, and commanded to lead the way.

Hurricane Kit followed close behind, with revolver drawn, ready to send a bullet crashing through the brain of the Mexican at the first sign of treachery on his part, while Jinks brought up the rear, his sharp eyes ever on the lookout for danger.

The Greaser went on without hesitation.

He was acting in good faith, for he knew that certain death awaited him if he did otherwise.

The direction he took led them away from the town, on the opposite side from that where the stronghold of Lightning Dick was located.

He kept on until about a mile had been traversed, and then struck a narrow, half-beaten trail that wound in and out among the bowlders.

Here Red Juan paused.

"I dare go no further, for fear I shall be seen by my comrades on guard," he whispered. "The cave is straight ahead, about fifty yards away. You can't help finding it, if you follow this path."

"Good enough," said Hurricane Kit, in the same guarded tone. "If that's the case, we have no further need of your guidance."

"Then I can go?" the Mexican asked, with unconcealed eagerness.

"No, indeed!" replied Kit, promptly. "I've no notion of letting you go to warn your comrades of our approach. I intend to leave you here until our return. Then, if you have been acting in good faith, you shall be set at liberty; but if, on the contrary, you have deceived us, you shall pay dearly for your treachery."

With the assistance of Jinks the Mexican was securely bound and gagged, an operation to which the fellow submitted with very ill grace.

This done, the helpless Greaser was pitched

unceremoniously into the bushes a few feet distant from the path.

Then, with their revolvers ready for immediate use, the two daring adventurers cautiously advanced along the trail.

Hurricane Kit led the way, and the countryman followed close at his heels.

Not a word was spoken, as they advanced with the noiselessness of serpents, crawling on their hands and knees, and seeming a part of the gray earth itself.

Suddenly Kit halted, uttering a low, warning hiss.

The sound of approaching footsteps reached his ears.

Crouching behind a bowlder, the two men, with ready weapons, watched and waited in breathless suspense.

CHAPTER X.

A FIEND AT WORK.

LET us shift the scene to the secret rendezvous of Black Gaspard.

It was a large cavern in the heart of the mountain, accessible only by means of a narrow, well-concealed path.

The cavern consisted of two apartments, rudely furnished, separated from each other by a curtain of skins.

In the larger of these, at one end, a cheerful fire was blazing, the smoke escaping through an opening overhead.

Around the fire were gathered several ruffians, who were passing away the time by playing cards.

At the other end of the cavern, a man was stretched out upon the rocky floor; it was no other than Charles Castleton, the banker, bound hand and foot.

On the other side of the curtain, lying upon a couch of skins, was his daughter, Cora, whose swollen eyes gave evidence that she had been weeping violently.

Neither her hands nor her feet were secured, but they might as well have been, for it was impossible to leave the place without being detected by the sharp-eyed guards at the other end of the cavern.

The maiden felt that her situation was a perilous one; why she had been brought to that dismal place she could not conjecture, and terrible fears filled her breast as she listened to the oaths and ribald jests of the ruffians outside.

She knew her father was near by, but she dared not speak to him, for her rough guards had threatened to gag her if she uttered a sound.

The banker, too, was deeply buried in thought.

It was evident to him that he was in the hands of desperate men, and he was greatly concerned, not so much for his own safety as for that of his defenseless daughter.

As he lay there, bound hand and foot, Charles Castleton recalled his interview with Lightning Dick, and he heartily wished that he had taken the advice of the road-agent and turned his back on Bullion City.

The outlaw chief had been right, when he said that danger awaited him in the rough mining-camp.

But the advice had gone unheeded, and now the banker could only wonder how he was to get out of his unpleasant predicament.

Castleton had endeavored to learn from the men who guarded him, the purpose for which he and his daughter had been brought there, but they had promptly made him understand that the less he said the better it would be for him, so he was forced to remain in ignorance.

Hour after hour dragged slowly away, every minute seeming an age to the disconsolate prisoners, while the ruffians, deeply engrossed in their game, paid no attention to those whom they had been detailed to watch.

Finally, about the middle of the afternoon following Castleton's abduction, a man strode boldly into the cavern.

He was Black Gaspard.

At a wave of his hand, the guards retired, and the Gambler King was left alone with his prisoner.

At sight of the gambler, Castleton gave vent to a low cry of surprise.

"You here!" he exclaimed.

Black Gaspard laughed.

"Yes, I!" he answered. "My dear sir, how do you find yourself to-day? Well, I hope."

"If I am, no thanks to you, for I suppose it is to you that I am indebted for my sudden change of location," retorted the banker, curtly.

"You guess like a Yankee, my friend," admitted Gaspard.

"Well," continued the prisoner, calmly, "suppose you enlighten me as to the meaning of all this. I am desirous of knowing why I and my daughter are routed at night and brought to this desolate place. Explain, sir, if you please!"

The Gambler King chuckled.

"All in good time, sir. Don't be too impatient. Remember, Rome was not built in a day. First, let me inquire, how do you like your present quarters?"

"So well that I am anxious to get out of them," growled Castleton, in response.

"I thought so," laughed the gambler. "This cave is not so pleasant as some places, and I dare say you will leave it without regret."

"Providing I get a chance. When do you intend to let us go, Black Gaspard?"

The gambler smiled grimly.

"My dear sir," he responded, "that depends altogether upon yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that, unless you agree to certain conditions, you will never leave this cave alive," was Gaspard's startling declaration.

As he glanced into the stern face of the gambler, Charles Castleton felt that he was in the power of a bold, unscrupulous villain, who would hesitate at nothing, and a feeling of uneasiness crept over him.

"I suppose you mean to extort ransom," he suggested, calm to all outward appearances.

The gambler nodded approvingly.

"My friend, you've hit the nail squarely on the head," he exclaimed. "You seem to know my intentions as well as I do myself."

"Your audacity is sublime, sir," cried the banker. "Brigandage is out of date."

"Not in Bullion City," corrected Black Gaspard, laughingly.

"Confound Bullion City! I wish I had never seen the infernal place," exclaimed Castleton, and the wish came from the innermost depths of his heart. "Well, you scoundrel, for how much will you set my daughter and I at liberty?"

The banker breathed more freely, now that he believed that a certain sum would secure their release, but the reply of the gambler fell upon his ears like a thunder-clap.

Leaning forward, with his glittering eyes fastened on the face of his prisoner, Black Gaspard gave his answer, bringing out each word slowly, and with startling distinctness.

"For fifty thousand dollars, and the hand of your daughter in marriage!"

Charles Castleton was speechless.

The audacity of the villain's proposition almost took his breath away.

Black Gaspard stood keenly watching the effect of his words upon the banker.

"Well," he said, after a brief pause, "what think you of my conditions, Charles Castleton?"

The reply of the banker was prompt and to the point.

"Your demands are ridiculous," he exclaimed, "and will receive no attention. If you seek to impose on me in this manner, you miserable scoundrel, you will find you have got hold of the wrong man."

His tones were energetic and excited, but the Gambler King only laughed, provokingly.

"Keep cool, my dear sir, and listen to reason," he said. "Please bear in mind that you are wholly in my power, and, therefore, it will be well for you to do as I wish. I have here a blank check on a Denver bank, in which, if I am correctly informed, you have deposited considerably more than the sum I mention. Now, all you have to do is to fill out this blank, making it payable to the order of yourself, sign and indorse it. The rest I will attend to."

"I'll see you in a warmer place, first," declared Castleton, emphatically. "The sum you name is outrageous, to say nothing of the other part of your proposal."

"Ah! You refer to your daughter, I suppose. I tell you, friend Castleton, my heart is set on that girl, and mine she shall be. But, of course, I want the stern sire's consent before the knot is tied."

"You'll never get it, you fiend," cried the banker, excitedly. "I would suffer a thousand deaths before I would consent to such an arrangement."

Black Gaspard's face grew stern.

"You'll find I'm not trifling," he said, grimly. "I mean business. That, then, is your decision?"

"It is," replied the banker, firmly.

"Nothing can alter it?"

"Nothing."

A grim look swept over the swarthy countenance of the gambler.

"We will see," he said, quietly.

He gave a shrill signal, and immediately his men bounded into the cave.

The Gambler King issued his instructions in a low tone, and the ruffians sprung to work with alacrity.

A stout post was planted in a crevice in the rocky floor at the furthest end of the cavern and to it Charles Castleton was securely bound.

A quantity of combustible material was then obtained, and scattered in a circle around the post.

The banker comprehended what was coming, but he viewed the proceedings with a contemptuous sneer.

The ruffians worked with all the zeal of red Indians preparing their victim for the torture, and speedily had things in readiness for business.

Then they stood in a state of eager expectancy, waiting their leader's command to ignite the pile.

Black Gaspard approached the banker.

"The boys are eager for the fun," he said, "but if you choose to give in, the proceedings shall be indefinitely postponed. Come, this is your last chance. Will you sign the check?"

Castleton cast a look of scorn upon his persecutor.

"Never!" he cried. "Go ahead, and do your worst. I defy you!"

Gaspard, nettled by the obstinacy of his prisoner, uttered a curse.

"Touch her off, boys!" he directed.

But before this could be done, there was an unexpected interruption.

With a shrill scream, Cora Castleton flung aside the curtain of skins, and swiftly crossing the intervening space, threw herself upon her knees at the feet of the gambler, wildly entreating him to spare her father's life.

The sight of the fair girl kneeling there, with disheveled hair and tearful eyes, would have moved most men, but Black Gaspard possessed a heart of flint.

"Confound the jade!" he growled, harshly, annoyed at the interruption. "Here, some of you, take her away and stop her infernal noise."

Two ruffians seized the pleading maiden and, in spite of her desperate struggles, hustled her away without ceremony, while the Gambler King, with his own hand, fired the heap of combustibles that surrounded the prisoner.

It was not his intention to kill the banker, by any means. It would be a poor policy to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs.

But Black Gaspard meant to give his prisoner a thorough heating, confident that he could conquer his obstinate spirit, and make him conform to his wishes.

The fire blazed up brightly. It was so arranged that the flames would not reach the person of the banker, yet he would get the full benefit of the heat.

The elated ruffians continually piled on fresh material, and the fire every moment grew hotter.

Soon the heat began to be felt by the prisoner, but not a muscle of his face changed; he was determined not to gratify his tormentors by either word or look.

With face stern and relentless as Fate itself, Black Gaspard stood with folded arms, keenly watching the banker.

He thought that the latter would soon be glad to cry for mercy, but he was disappointed, for Castleton showed no signs of yielding.

An exclamation of impatience escaped him, as he noted the stoical indifference with which the banker faced the torture.

"He's a gritty one, but, by Heaven! I'll bring him down a peg," he grimly said to himself.

Hotter grew the fire, stirred by the gambler's hirings, who hugely enjoyed the novel sport.

Soon the heat was almost intolerable, but Castleton set his teeth firmly, and not a sound escaped him.

Another minute passed; then there was a low moan, as the head of the tortured banker sunk forward upon his breast.

Human nature could stand no more; he had fainted.

With a muttered curse, the gambler leaped forward, scattering the flaming brands, and reaching the side of the prisoner, whom he cut loose with a few vigorous strokes of the knife.

He had feared that the banker was dead, but now a swift inspection showed him that it was only a faint.

"I'll soon bring him to his senses," said Black Gaspard, confidently, "and then we will see what effect the roasting has had upon the will of the obstinate fool."

He produced a flask, and poured a liberal quantity of its contents down the throat of the

unconscious banker, who soon opened his eyes and glared wildly around.

A deep groan fell from the lips of the wretched man as he recalled his terrible position, and Black Gaspard laughed gloatingly.

"The genial warmth of yonder bonfire does not seem to agree with you," he remarked, coolly. "My dear sir, ten minutes more of such red-hot fun would have converted you into a most excellent roast. Indeed, you look tender already."

Charles Castleton glared fiercely at his tormentor, but made no reply to the taunting speech.

The Gambler King drew a paper from his pocket and extended it toward his prisoner.

"Here is the check," he remarked, quietly. "Will you sign it? If not, back you go to the fire. Take your choice!"

The banker hesitated.

At first he had doubted the intentions of his captor, believing that the threats were made for the purpose of frightening him into submission, but now he was firmly convinced that Black Gaspard had the heart, as well as the power, to burn him to a crisp if he did not yield.

Charles Castleton loved life dearly; and, besides, if he lived, he might be of aid to his daughter, who would otherwise be hopelessly in the power of the ruffian; so, with a choking voice, he signified his willingness to yield.

The Gambler King chuckled with grim satisfaction as he produced a pocket inkstand and pen and handed them to the banker, together with the blank check.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "I had a conviction that a slight foretaste of what awaits you in another world would serve to bring you to your senses."

With trembling hand, Castleton filled out the check, according to direction, and handed it to his persecutor, who stored it away in his pocket with an air of intense satisfaction.

"Thank you, my friend!" he exclaimed. "I only regret that you did not yield before, as it would have spared you considerable pain, but for that you have yourself to thank. Now, then, I am off for Denver, to realize on this bit of paper which you have so kindly furnished me. When I return, I'll bring a preacher with me, and then we will celebrate a certain event by setting you at liberty. Ha! ha!"

The prisoner groaned.

"Well, my friend," continued the gambler, "I'm sorry to leave you, but I must go. Hope to find you in better spirits when I return. *Au revoir!*"

With a mocking laugh, Black Gaspard took his departure, while the unfortunate banker, sinking upon the rocky floor, groaned in agony of body and spirit.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE CAVERN.

CROUCHING low beside the trail, Hurricane Kit and Jonathan Jinks anxiously watched and waited.

The footsteps rapidly drew nearer, and presently a man hurried past the place where they were concealed, coming from the direction of the cave.

Owing to the darkness, his face could not be seen, but the two watchers recognized the tall, athletic form as that of the Gambler King.

"It's Black Gaspard, and he has been to interview his prisoners," was Kit's inward exclamation.

All unconscious of the proximity of his foes, the gambler strode swiftly along the trail, and soon the echoes of his footsteps died away in the distance.

The two trailers remained in their hiding-place, however, not knowing how many men might be following the gambler.

But ten—twenty minutes passed in silence, and, feeling that further delay was unnecessary, Hurricane Kit gave the word to advance.

Cautiously the two men crawled along the rocky path, with all the stealth of Indian trailers.

They were surrounded by gloom so intense that objects ten feet away were invisible, and they realized that everything depended on their caution.

The foe might be close by, and, if such were the case, the slightest sound on the part of our friends would betray their whereabouts, and attract a volley of pistol bullets.

Five minutes passed in painful silence.

Suddenly Hurricane Kit halted, clutching the arm of his companion.

"Look ahead!" he whispered.

Jinks did so, and immediately gave a violent start.

What they saw was a small, round light, glowing in the darkness like a coal of fire.

"What is it—a jack-o'-lantern?" whispered Jonathan, with a tinge of superstition.

For a moment Kit made no reply.

He was puzzled to tell the nature of the light ahead of them.

Suddenly, however, light broke upon him.

"I see!" he whispered. "Yonder light is nothing more nor less than the lighted end of a cigar, and it naturally follows that there is a man behind it."

"Eggsactly!" assented Jinks.

"It is doubtless one of the gambler's men, who is guarding the entrance to the cave," continued Kit, in an undertone. "He must be disposed of."

An easy matter that, for a dead-shot like Kit, with the tell-tale light to guide his aim; but the youth was not inclined to use his revolver.

He knew that the pistol-shot would alarm the sentry's comrades inside the cave, and this would be disastrous to his plans.

The work must be done silently.

Directing his companion to remain where he was, Hurricane Kit crept stealthily toward the light.

He realized that the task before him was no easy one.

The outlaw must be silenced without attracting the attention of those within the cavern.

A single cry would be sufficient to defeat his enterprise.

But the youth proved himself equal to the occasion.

Creeping over the ground like a serpent, he was soon near enough to dimly distinguish the form of the sentinel, carelessly leaning against a boulder at the entrance to the cave.

Nearer the daring young trailer approached, his heart fairly in his throat lest, by some unlucky movement, he should betray his presence.

But luck favored him, and the guard smoked on, totally unconscious of the danger that threatened him.

Nearer and nearer Kit drew, until at length, but a few feet separated him from the unsuspecting ruffian.

Then, with a spring like that of a panther, the youth was upon him, both hands clutching his throat as he bore him to the ground.

The fellow struck the earth with a dull thud, lying there without a move.

The reason for this was obvious. In falling, his head had struck a sharp rock, the force of the blow depriving him of his senses.

Kit was well pleased at the easy way in which the guard had been disposed of, and he cautiously signaled to his companion, who was quickly on the spot.

The unconscious ruffian was speedily bound, and carried among the rocks and bushes to one side.

This done they waited to see if the slight disturbance had reached the ears of the men inside.

No sound came from within, however, and deeming the coast clear, our friends cautiously entered the narrow passage which led to the cave.

As they progressed, the faint murmur of voices reached their ears, while a gleam of light was visible at the end of the tunnel.

Progressing noiselessly, the two men reached the end of the passage, and peered cautiously out into the underground apartment.

The ruffians had removed all traces of the torture to which the banker had recently been submitted, and were once more gathered about the fire, indulging their natural propensities for gambling.

There were five of them, all stalwart, hard-featured fellows, and our friends foresaw that the task of subduing them would be no easy one.

At the other end of the chamber the form of Charles Castleton could be distinguished, and, though she was not to be seen, Hurricane Kit rightly conjectured that Cora was behind the curtain of skins.

Silently our friends looked in upon the picturesque scene.

They were in the shadows, and, consequently, felt secure from observation.

The guards, intent on their game, little dreamed of the presence of enemies.

A moment passed, and Hurricane Kit was considering the best mode of action, when suddenly one of the ruffians threw down his cards, arose, and walked directly toward the mouth of the tunnel, where our two friends were crouching.

Kit with difficulty suppressed a cry of dismay.

It was evidently the fellow's intention to pass through the passage, and if he did so, it was hardly probable that they would escape discovery.

Crouching close to the wall, with drawn knives, the two trailers waited in breathless anxiety.

Woe to the luckless ruffian if he chanced to detect them, for ten inches of cold steel would be instantly buried in his body.

But the man passed by without being made aware of their presence, although he came so close to Kit that their garments touched.

Our friends breathed more freely when the danger was over, but the next moment another fact was brought to mind.

The outlaw had gone outside, and of course he would at once note the absence of the guard.

This would lead to an investigation, the result of which was liable to be disastrous to Hurricane Kit and his pard.

Kit was determined to reach the captives and liberate them, and then make a desperate dash for the open air.

There was no time to be lost, and the youth cautiously crept into the cave, motioning his companion to follow.

Keeping in the shadows, they advanced with the noiselessness of cats, hugging close to the wall.

Thus they progressed, until they could no longer do so in safety.

They must now cross the space illuminated by the firelight, and it seemed impossible to do so without being discovered by the ruffians, who sat scarcely a dozen feet away.

Our friends paused in a state of indecision, and at this moment there came a loud shout from outside the cave.

The disappearance of the sentinel had been discovered, and the next moment the man came running back to inform his comrades.

The latter started to their feet, and darted away to look for their missing companion, forgetting the prisoners in their confusion.

Now was the time for action, and, bounding across the chamber, the two rescuers speedily cut the bonds that secured their friends.

Both Castleton and his daughter were profuse in their thanks to their bold deliverers, and Hurricane Kit felt like clasping the fair girl in his arms; but he felt that it was no time for tenderness.

There was desperate work to do.

"Come, friends!" exclaimed the young man, hurriedly; "there is no time to lose. We must fight our way out of here. Mr. Castleton, follow close behind us with your daughter. Hurry!"

He sprang forward as he spoke, with Jonathan Jinks at his side, but at that moment there was a confused pattering of feet, and the five ruffians dashed back into the cavern.

They had suspected the nature of the game on foot, and hurried in just in time to block the passage of the fugitives.

At sight of the two daring intruders, they uttered a wild yell and dashed forward.

With a cry of defiance, Hurricane Kit confronted the ruffians, his revolvers cocked and leveled.

"Back, you scoundrels!" he thundered. "Sure death awaits the first man who advances."

Jonathan Jinks stood with leveled weapons, ready to support his friend.

"I reckon thar 'll be a first-class circus hyar, ef you galoots don't haul off," he remarked, grimly.

The two men presented such a determined front that the gambler's hirelings paused, awed by the glittering "sixes" that looked them in the face.

It was a wild and picturesque scene—the two resolute men bravely holding at bay the infuriated ruffians; the banker and his daughter crouching, terrified, behind them; while over all the fire cast a weird, fantastic light.

Only for a moment did the gang hesitate. Then, with fierce shouts, they rushed forward.

Two sharp reports, blended as one, promptly followed the advance, and two of the men fell to the floor, with cries of agony.

The others did not waver, but kept determinedly on, and the next moment the air rung with the sharp cracking of revolvers and the shouts of the combatants.

For a moment it seemed as if Pandemonium had broken loose within the narrow confines of the cavern, but then the conflict suddenly came to a termination.

The result was highly gratifying to our friends. Four of the ruffians were stretched upon the

rocky floor, while the sole survivor was flying at the top of his speed for a place of safety.

Jinks pursued him as far as the entrance, firing shot after shot at his flying form, but the fellow escaped serious injury, and fled like a deer down the mountain-side in the direction of Bullion City.

Our friends lost no time in leaving the cavern. None of them had been injured in the late encounter, and, though Castleton was weak and unnerved from his recent experience, he insisted on an immediate departure. It was with feelings of heartfelt joy that he turned his back upon the place where he had undergone such a terrible ordeal.

Hurricane Kit supported Cora, while the banker leaned upon the sturdy arm of the countryman, and in this manner they slowly made their way down the mountain-side.

As they passed the spot where Red Juan had been left, Hurricane Kit, remembering his promise to the Mexican, stopped and set him at liberty.

The rascal, glad to get off so easily, speedily made himself scarce, and our friends continued their way.

They proceeded cautiously, not knowing how many of Black Gaspard's hirelings might be in the vicinity.

But fortune favored them, and, an hour later, they were safe in the mountain fastness of Lightning Dick.

CHAPTER XII.

EXIT BLACK GASPARD.

At the same time that these exciting scenes were being enacted in the mountain cave, Black Gaspard sat in his apartment, with his chair tilted back and his feet upon the table, lazily puffing a cigar.

From the adjoining room came the faint murmur of voices, but the gambler paid no heed to them; he was gloating over his success, and forming more elaborate schemes for the future.

In his hand he held the check that he had that day forced the banker to sign, and he frequently read it over, the operation seeming to afford him great satisfaction.

"Fifty thousand dollars!" he muttered, complacently. "That's not so bad. Once let me get hold of the cash, and I'll say good-bye to this infernal place, where road-agents are getting to be thicker than hairs on a dog. With the fair Cora for my bride, I will seek a more civilized community, and there live at my ease for the balance of my life. As for the old man, he can go to the d—l, for all I care, unless I should choose to bleed him for another fifty thousand. Ha, ha! A good idea, that. I think I will consider it—"

A black-gloved hand suddenly reached over his shoulder, and snatched the precious check.

Black Gaspard gave a start that nearly upset his equilibrium, as he turned fiercely on the intruder.

A masked man stood quietly before him, and Black Gaspard felt, rather than knew, that it was Lightning Dick.

"The d—l!" gasped the gambler, in astonishment.

"No; only his representative," corrected the road-agent, coolly. "You seem surprised to see me, Black Gaspard."

"Curse you! How did you get here?" demanded the gambler.

Lightning Dick nodded significantly toward the open window.

"Very careless in you to leave it open," he remarked.

The hand of the Gambler King furtively sought his belt, but, stealthy as the movement was, it did not escape the keen eyes of the outlaw.

In a twinkling his own revolver was out and threatening the gambler.

"That game won't work," he declared, emphatically. "Throw up your hands!"

With a baffled curse, Black Gaspard obeyed.

"You've got the drop, so there's no use kicking," he said, philosophically. "What's your little game, anyhow?"

Lightning Dick laughed.

"Nothing in particular," he answered. "I happened to look in while making my rounds, and beheld you examining this paper. I became curious to learn what it was, so I dropped in."

"And you'll oblige me by dropping out again," growled the gambler.

At this moment there was a loud rap at the door.

The road-agent started, uneasily.

"I think I'll be going," he exclaimed. "Good-night, Gaspard Gonzales. We shall meet again."

As he spoke, Lightning Dick vaulted lightly through the window, and immediately after came the clatter of hoofs, as he rode swiftly out of the camp.

Black Gaspard cursed fiercely as he hastened to unlock the door, for the audacious outlaw had carried the check away with him.

As the gambler opened the door, a man staggered into the room.

It was the fellow who had escaped from the mountain cave, covered with blood and dirt until he was scarcely recognizable.

It took but a minute for him to tell his story, and if ever there was an angry man, it was the Gambler King, then.

He swore and raved, and frothed at the mouth like a madman, but after awhile his rage began to moderate, and he grew more calm and collected.

"Tom!" he cried. "Go and collect the boys. Hurry!"

The ruffian hastened away, and Black Gaspard impatiently paced the floor, chafing like a caged tiger.

"A thousand curses on my infernal luck!" he growled. "The check is gone, and the prisoners, too. Perdition! They must and shall be recovered."

It did not take long to collect the ruffians who acknowledged Black Gaspard as their chief and employer; they were generally where he could call them at any moment, and within half an hour after the departure of Lightning Dick, the gambler was on the way to his mountain retreat, with over a score of bold cut-throats at his back.

Day was just breaking when he reached the cave.

There he found the bodies of his men, as well as the sentinel who had been bound and gagged by Hurricane Kit; but the prisoners had flown.

However, it was an easy matter to find their trail, and this they followed with the persistency of bloodhounds.

The fugitives had not tried to conceal their trail, and Black Gaspard and his gang followed with untiring persistence until, at length, they found themselves at the gloomy bottom of Death Canyon.

Had the gambler been less excited, he would have thought twice before venturing into the canyon, after his recent experience there; but, as it was, he thought only of recovering his lost prisoners.

But Black Gaspard was destined to pay dearly for his heedlessness.

Upon rounding a sharp bend in the trail, he was astounded to see a party of masked horsemen stretched across the canyon, silently awaiting his coming.

Lightning Dick sat upon his horse, a few paces in advance of his men, grim and motionless as a statue.

"Hands up!" he ordered, sternly, as the gang from Bullion City paused in consternation. "Surrender or die! We have you corraled."

Dismayed, the gambler and his men turned to flee, but, as they did so, a second party under the lead of Hurricane Kit filed silently out into the pass, cutting off their retreat.

The Gambler King was completely surrounded, and a curse, loud and furious, burst from his lips.

"Perdition!" he yelled. "We are in a trap. Forward! boys, and cut your way out."

His men sprang forward with a yell, and at the same time the two parties of road-agents closed in upon them.

The next moment the canyon was filled with the sounds of conflict—the spiteful crack of revolvers, the whizzing of bullets, the neighing of horses, and the wild cries of the struggling ruffians for Lightning Dick's outlaws fought in perfect silence.

Black Gaspard and his followers battled fiercely, for life and liberty were at stake, but their exertions were in vain.

The knights of the road swept down upon them in an overwhelming body, and, after five minutes of desperate conflict, with nearly half their number killed, and the Gambler King, himself, captured, the remainder threw down their arms and cried for quarter.

Lightning Dick's loss was slight, and without loss of time he had his prisoners carried to the stronghold, elated at his triumph.

The dead were buried, and all traces of the conflict speedily removed from the canyon.

An hour later Black Gaspard was brought before the road-agent chief.

Lightning Dick stood awaiting him, stern and relentless as Fate; beside him were grouped Hurricane Kit, Jonathan Jinks, Charles Castleton and Cora, while behind them the outlaws

were ranged in a semicircle, grim and motionless as so many specters.

It was an impressive tableau, but the gambler did not enjoy it.

Instead, his eyes glowed like those of a wild beast at bay, and curses loud and deep fell from his lips, as he glared at his foes.

He saw that the tables had been neatly turned; the game was up, and visions of a tree and a dangling rope floated before his eyes.

There was a moment of painful silence, and then Lightning Dick spoke.

"Gaspard Gonzales," he exclaimed, in stern accents, "you are at the end of your rope. The time has come to check your villainous career. Do you know who I am? No; then let me enlighten you. One year ago, this gold valley was in the possession of a miner, George Brascombe, and his child, when you swept down with your gang of cut-throats, and wrested it from them. The miner was left to die, but the child escaped, swearing to avenge him, and recover the property. With this end in view, Gaspard Gonzales, I have worked, until now the time has come to claim my own. Yes, Black Gaspard, I am the miner's child—his daughter, Bertha!"

As the road-agent finished speaking, the black mask was removed, and the stern but beautiful features of a young woman of twenty were revealed.

Hurricane Kit uttered a loud cry of astonishment, and it was echoed by Jinks, the countryman, who had been strangely affected by the outlaw's narrative.

He sprang forward with a glad cry, tearing off his beard and wig as he did so, disclosing the not unhandsome face of a man of fifty.

"Bertha!"

"Father!"

And the next moment they were wrapt in an affectionate embrace.

George Brascombe soon explained.

He had been rescued from his perilous position by a friendly Indian, who kindly took him to his cave, where he immediately recovered from his injuries.

Then he returned to Bullion City, where he remained, as Jonathan Jinks, vainly watching for some chance to recover his possessions and totally ignorant that Lightning Dick and his lost daughter were identical.

The meeting between him and Bertha was tender in the extreme, and Black Gaspard, in this hour of joy, could but feel that he was euehered at every point.

That afternoon our friends boldly entered Bullion City with their prisoners.

Of course their coming caused intense excitement, and frequent were the cries of astonishment as the "cits" looked for the first time upon the unmasked face of the famous Lightning Dick.

Fierce were the glances bestowed on the daring intruders, but George Brascombe earnestly addressed the excited populace.

He told his story briefly, but with an air that convinced his hearers of its truth, and did not forget to reveal Black Gaspard's dealings with Castleton, the banker.

Popular feeling is easily changed in the West, and the happy result was that the fickle crowd cheered our friends until they were hoarse, while fierce, vindictive looks were cast upon the discomfited Gambler King.

A neck-tie party was held in his honor, and when the sun went down, that night, its last rays fell upon the ghastly forms of Black Gaspard and his men, swinging grimly from the trees.

There is but little to add.

The Castletons immediately departed for the East; the banker had seen enough of western ways, and preferred to spend the remainder of his days where human life was valued a little more highly.

As for Hurricane Kit, he decided to remain with his road-agent friends until they were fairly settled in their new quarters; but, when he parted from Cora Castleton, it was with the understanding that he was to visit her eastern home, at no distant day, and claim her for his bride.

George Brascombe and Bertha, Lightning Dick no longer, assumed control of affairs, and were soon on the high road to fortune.

Bullion City, to-day, cleared of its rough characters, is one of the most orderly and prosperous towns in Colorado, but its "oldest inhabitants" delight to entertain the stranger with stories of the red-hot days, when Black Gaspard ruled the camp, and Lightning Dick took toll among the neighboring mountains.

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